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# 暗黒騎士様 といっしょ!

Together with the dark knight!

～勘違いから始まる迷宮攻略～

ファミ通文庫

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(僕の夢――  
それはズバリ、都会の二等地に  
マイホームを建てる事だっ！)



### アルバ 暗黒騎士

田舎から夢をもって帝都に上京し、冒険者となった純朴な青年。  
漆黒の全身鎧と鮮血のような大剣は祖父からの贈り物。

Alba

「俺はアルバ様に寄生するしかありません」



### ガーネット

ルーファの幼馴染みでパーティー唯一の常識人。言葉が少なく暗黒騎士の良き理解者。毛深いことが美とされるドワーフ族ゆえ、毛が薄いことを気にしている。

Garnet

「誰が幼女じゃ！」



「見えてる」  
ルーフアの白いパンツを  
指摘してきた。

迷宮の死神、阻む者、全  
冒険者の怨敵。  
それを見て生きて帰って  
きた者は一人もおらず、  
屍となつて帰ってきた者  
達が蘇り、絶望と共に語つ  
た姿だけが伝えられてい  
る、伝説の殺戮者。  
暗黒騎士はゆつくりと彼  
女を指さして――

# Prologue

# **Prelude: The Dark Knight, Darker than Black**

A long, stony road, continuing forever, the chilly, freezing atmosphere drifting in the underground labyrinth, only a girl's voice could be heard loud and clear.

"O flame, roam free, and burn it all to cinders, 'Fireball'."

From the cane, held in the elven girl's, Rufa's, hands, a small egg of fire was brought forth, and blew off the head of a goblin that was about to attack her. Being a monster, nothing more than a lump of magic, the goblin turned to small particles of light, and was sucked up by Rufa's body. As a result of that, her aura grew stronger, but she had no time to enjoy that.

"Geki!"

Not showing the slightest hesitation after his ally was murdered in front of his eyes, another goblin raised a roar, and made his way to jump at Rufa as well. However, the female dwarf heavy warrior that slipped in front of her, Garnet, sent him flying with her admirably huge shield, held in her left hand.

"Hoi!"

Following up with a mace swing, which she held in her right hand, she cleanly separated the goblin's head from its body. Once again, the monster broke down into light, and disappeared. However, the tens of monsters in front of them didn't care all too much about yet another lost comrade. And, to their left, right, and even behind them, there was only the cold wall of the labyrinth. Meaning, they had no place to run off.

"Damned, this is all your fault!"

As Garnet threw that at her childhood friend standing in her shadow, Rufa puffed out her cheeks in a sulking manner.

"How rude. My plan to gather the monsters with my 'Alarm' chant, and get stronger in an instant was a perfect success."

"It is perfect, yes...Unless we get defeated first!"

Nothing would have any meaning if they didn't manage to defeat the gathered monsters. While Garnet was busy smashing down yet another attacker, Rufa showed an invincible smile.

"Fu fu fu, do not worry. I have anticipated that something like this might occur, which is why I stole a magic scroll with 'Fire Storm' on it from the castle's storage room."

"That is not something to act big about! But, there's no use right now. Hurry and use it."

"Fufufu...I forgot to bring it with me."

"You idiot—!"

Fishing in her bag, Rufa's face went pale, and as Garnet screamed out yet another insult, she struck down a goblin with her mace once again. During that process, her breathing had gotten rough, signaling that she had soon to arrive at her limits.

"Ugh, so it all ends in a place like this..."

In front of the slowly approaching sea of monsters, words of despair leaked out of Garnet's mouth. Behind her, Rufa showed a dauntless expression as she prepared for the worst.

"Can't help it. Rather than having both of us fall victim here, it would be wise to have at least one person escape."

"Are you—"

"I will bear the responsibility of running away, so please die for my sake and buy me some time."

"Would it not be the other way around?!"

"Having a meagre elvish magician like me buy time is impossible!"

"I should be getting angry here!"

"Or are you saying that a female elf like me should just end up violated by these goblins like in some erotic novel?!"

"So noisy!"

Garnet mustered up all the strength she had left, and slapped the butt of the perverted elf. Watching that comedic exchange, the goblins were standing still in bewilderment.

—I don't know what it's like for them, but us being lumps of magic, we have absolutely no sexual desire or anything...

—I really wish they could stop this trend of treating us as sex offenders everytime they see us.

—Just like the orcs!

With an expression that could be interpreted as her understanding their conversation, Rufa's eyes gave a slight sparkle as the goblins forgot the battle for a moment.

"Now!"

She tried to slip past the sides of the standing goblins, giving off the dash of her life. However, the gods weren't that forgiving today.

"Blergh!"

Her foot got caught in the stone paving, and Rufa did a beautiful dive into the ground, head first. Not long after, the goblins slowly surrounded the foolish elf.

—Should we just kill her?

—Yup.



Exchanging glances with a fed-up expression, the goblins brandished their rusty daggers.

“What are you doing, you idiot princess!”

All the while being enraged, Garnet still dashed forwards to save her childhood friend—instinctively leaning over, filled with dread.

That moment, a flash of darkness completely filled the passage, bisected the goblins’ torsos, and flew past the girls’ heads.

“.....Huh?”

In front of the dumbfounded girls, the bodies of the monsters that brimmed in the passage were perfectly split in half. Rich magical power from the monsters filled their bodies, feeling strength to the level of getting dizzy, Garnet focussed her sight down the passage where the black light had come from.

“Was that...sword magic just now...?”

Those that crawled around in the labyrinth like these girls—Adventurers, had this mysterious strength called ‘Aura’ dwelling inside them. Using this strength, they could bring forth ‘Arts’, enabling them to fight against these monsters, against which the normal folk saw no hope of winning. There was the form of ‘Martial Arts’, with which one could strengthen one’s bodily parameters, creating various forms of phenomena through chants called ‘Magic’. And, by running this aura through your sword, you let loose the ‘Sword Magic’.

Acting as a vanguard adventurer, you would hold at least one or two of those sword magic spells. However, there is a limit to the sharpness of the blade, and being able to create big enough of an aura blade to cut through this amount of monsters certainly wasn’t a common skill.

“Maybe some 6th rank adventurer? But then, why would such a wild one be here on the first floor of all places...”

All the while gratefully accepting their second chance, something appeared in front of the slightly perplexed girls, producing no sound whatsoever. A jet black armor, blending into the darkness of the labyrinth, a large blade, red like it was drenched in fresh blood, and a mask imitating the face of a devil. Oozing out of the armor, a thick and dense aura, looked like a devil’s wings, a heat haze warping the atmosphere. Was a human wrapped in this armor, or was it actually the devil himself?

The girls knew the name of the sinister armored knight.

“The Dark Knight...”

The death god of the labyrinth, the obstructor, the sworn enemy of all adventurers. Nobody had returned alive so far after laying eyes upon this monstrosity, the ones that fell victim to him were resurrected, and their appearances riddled by disappearance were enough to stir up the legends of slaughterer.

“.....”

The Dark Knight just calmly, silently continued to walk towards Rufa, who could only stare at the one that would bring her inevitable death earlier

than she had wished, not showing any signs of resisting. And, like the Dullahan, sentencing people to death, he pointed at the poor girl, and—  
“I can see it.”

Past the finger tip he was using to point at the girl were her white panties, still visible after her skirt got flipped up during her failed escape.

““.....””

An awkward atmosphere filled the space between the exposed elf and the Dark Knight.

“...What’s up with this?”

Only Garnet’s fed-up retort reverberated inside the labyrinth’s walls.

This was the meeting between the idiot princess—the 7th princess of the Goldot Empire, Rufa, and the Dark Knight—the countryman Alba.

# Chapter 0: The Countryman Before the Curtain Rises

“Amazing.”

Looking up at the expanding castle walls, I let out a sigh of admiration. Having left my home in the countryside about a month ago, I finally arrived at the capital of the Goldot Empire. Putting together all the hard work I had to go through to arrive here, it looks even more impressive. Being on the larger side of a city with about 200.000 inhabitants, it was surrounded with equally astounding walls, about ten times the height of me. Not to mention that, as if I’ve heard from certain talk around the area, there are actually nine walls. Even with the use of magic, only imagining how much time and money it must’ve cost them makes me feel dizzy.

“That’s what you expect from the Empire that has ruled over this continent for millennia.”

Though I find it a bit hard to believe that a single royal family would be able to reign over this land for thousands of years without falling to ruin, seeing these walls here definitely makes it easier to believe for sure.

“This should work out, yeah.”

I nodded with confidence. There can’t be any better place to grant my dream. Said dream—I want to build my own home in this most beneficial ground, called this metropole!

That being said, it’s not like I hated my birthplace or anything. However, being born a man, I want to try and see how far I can go with my own strength. At the same time, I’m not childish enough that I’ll manage to become some hero sung about in legends either. As an in-between so to speak, I arrived at my dream of building my own home here in the capital. My master also commented that ‘As a man, you should aim to be at least the owner of one castle in the Empire’, so if I managed to achieve that, even he will admit my growth.

“Alright, I’m going to give it my all!”

Motivating myself, I started walking towards the gate. Having heard that the amount of people trying to enter and leave the city was at its highest in the morning, I planned my arrival to happen around late noon, and that bore fruit. I wasn’t forced to wait in a long line, and I could safely pass the gate—not quite, because the second I was about to accomplish that, I was surrounded by a large number of gatekeepers.

“Eh?”

In surprise, I stopped my feet. Don't tell me...they're telling me to pay the entry fee! Damn, I don't have much left from my long travels, but I can't help it this time. Quietly, I reached for the pouch on my chest, when the gatekeepers suddenly let out an angry voice.

“D-Don't move!”

I mean, I can't pay the entry fee if I'm not allowed to move...

As I was standing there frozen, not sure what to do, a middle-aged man, wearing armor, approached us, presumably, the superior of these guards.

“Excuse me, but who are you?”

As sweat was running down the superior's forehead, he instigated a conversation with that question, a grim expression branding his face.

...Maybe he's weak to the heat? We're still in early spring, but the sunlight over here might be a bit more tough than back at my workplace. If I didn't use some cooling magic in this armor, I might start sweating like crazy as well. Giving him my regards for his hard work inside my heart, I answered his question.

“An adventurer.”

To be completely honest, I was actually jobless right now, but I was certainly admiring to become an adventurer, so I hope they could overlook this slight inaccuracy. Together with many dangerous monsters, these so-called dungeon labyrinths bring forth immense riches. To become an adventurer that dives deep down into those, I chose this city found in the Goldot Empire. Not having the riches of being a noble, but rather crafty ability of a countryside salesman, this is the only method I could come up with to grant my dream.

Luckily, I was trained by my grandparents and my master, so I have confidence in my physical strength, if nothing else. If I do my best, and work for a few years, I'll definitely be able to build my own home. That's why—

“Where is the labyrinth?”

In high spirits, I lost myself for a second, and took a step forward. In response, the guards' faces distorted into fear as if they had seen Fenrir, and they pointed the tips of their spears at me.

...I wonder why. Ever since I left for this trip, incidents like these, with people doubting me, or even showing fear, tend to happen more and more. I could understand if this was some countryside, where you'd rarely see any soldiers. They'd definitely be surprised to see a fully-armored man, wielding a greatsword.

But, this is a big city, dripping with a great number of adventurers. Seeing an armored man shouldn't be any surprising, and no reason to show any fear...

“Where is the labyrinth.”

Thinking that something was off, I tilted my head in confusion, and I repeated the same words again, taking yet another step forward. The guards then all simultaneously took a step back, and opened a path for me.



“Crossing the gate, the way on the right.”

The superior was sweating even more profusely now, as he taught me the way.

Thank god...What should I have done if they were hissing “Get lost, you country potato!”. Letting out a relieved sigh that didn’t leave my helmet, I finally managed to cross the gate. Goldot Empire, I finally made it to your capital!

—Or so I got my hopes up, but the scenery in front of me didn’t make me think of this as a lively and busy city, but rather a plain, almost depressingly empty open field.

...Eh, was I deceived? Confused, I looked over my back.

“S-Sir, what was that?! That was just like—”

“I don’t know myself. However, naming itself an adventurer that plans on challenging the labyrinth, I don’t have anything to hold it back.”

“B-But!”

“This Empire is a country that has flourished thanks to the strength of these adventurers. That’s why, we have to follow the law, and let every adventurer in, no matter the race or origin. Even if it was the devil himself...”

I tried asking the guards for advice and an explanation, but they seemed to be busy in a conversation, so I felt bad asking them. Still, what is going on here? Is this some sort of open space that will get used later on? Well, thinking about it won’t bring me any further. Guess I’ll just forget about this and head to the labyrinth...Ah, I know!

I saw another castle wall past that plain open field. Past there must be the lively city that I was imagining, and I could see the tip of the castle in the distance even. Since I’ll be planning to build up my home around there, I might as well check out the city first before I head to the labyrinth! Deciding on that, I made my way towards the second gate at great momentum.

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The residents of the Goldot Empire all boastfully call the landscape of the capital the ‘Thousand Year Great Tree’. Having the shining white castle as it’s middle point, the round castle walls, massing nine in number, ring around that look like the growth rings of a tree, if seen from above. At first, it was a small village, unable to call itself a country, but the people that have heard rumours of the labyrinth gathered, and these walls were built to protect their new residences. As a result, the Rings Wall was born, and now, a thousand years later, it counts as the main pride and glory of the residents. Being a popular tourist spot for travelers and residents alike, people that are caught by the guards as they try to carve their names into the walls will get billed with a high price to pay. However, this Ring Wall doesn’t consist of only profits. It acted as a protective mechanism for the residents inside, but right now, it accounts to separating rich from poor.

With the imperial castle as it's center, the first ward, following the quarters of the imperial family in the second ward, and the third ward being resided by higher class nobles, meaning that the further you went inside, the more the people living there were living in wealth and riches, and to say it the other way around, the more one distances himself from the castle, the poorer the people get. Concerning the most outer ward, the ninth, it is most commonly referred to as 'Verge of the City', housing the entrance to the deep labyrinth.

To guarantee the utmost safety, the city was structured to have a safe distance away from there, and it was a fortunate space with a lot of coming and going, but after the expansion of the castle walls during these thousand years, it has been wrapped up inside the walls even.

Being technically inside the city, there is nothing to see around that entrance. Those stairs, continuing deep downwards, with stone-built protective shrines from a thousand years ago, and a casern of guards people, are still surrounded by nothing else. Naturally, it was all for the one in a million chance in case monsters would start rushing out from the labyrinth, but in the thousand year-long history, such an event has never occurred even once. As a result, the two guards standing-by at the entrance had too much time on their hands, day in, day out.

"That's the best thing. With a cheap five silver coins, that bastard Dick went to a brothel to enjoy himself. And the one that appeared was his own mother!"

"Ha ha ha, that's tough, even as a joke."

The seemingly new guard returned a force smile to the middle-aged guard's vulgar story. He had heard the same story around three days ago, but he wasn't an idiot enough to run any risk to destroy a good workplace relationship by interrupting him to state that.

"No no no, I'm dead serious. That Dick let out a horrifying scream—Oh, look at that."

Realizing that a human figure was slowly approaching, the middle-aged guard stopped his story mid-ways, and fixed his stature as he straightened his back. However, seeing that it was a familiar adventurer of his, he quickly reverted back to his previous position.

"Yo, Bulk. You managed to pay off the resurrection from before?"

"Bastard, I'm going in there to pay that off, what else would I be coming here for."

"Haha, I'm betting one silver coin that you're overdoing it, adding more to your debt this time."

"I'll remember those words when I get back in one piece."

Following Bulk, which seemed to act as the leader, five other adventurers started descending the stairs. Watching them off, the new guard let out a voice of admiration.

"That's pretty amazing, that you remember the names of so many adventurers."

"It's only the names of the party leaders though. You saw that lizard man in that group, right? I just can't get myself to remember his name."

"There are some races with names that make it difficult for us humans to pronounce them."

The lizard man they were talking about was called Eustoreptospondils, and it would take a bit longer until he learned of that name, which made you bite your own tongue by trying to pronounce it.

"But, isn't it pretty tough to remember the faces and names of all the leaders?"

"Pretty. There are also those that stop right when I start remembering them."

In the midst of those weren't just the ones that felt like they had reached their limit, and retired, but also those whose corpses were so badly damaged that they were unable to receive resurrection magic, staying dead indefinitely.

"Well, once you become a veteran like me, you'll immediately make out the guys that'll stop immediately by just a glance."

"Huh, you really are a Senpai."

Half-serious, half sweet-talking, the new guard let out a sigh. Seemingly having enjoyed that, the middle-aged guard showed a grin.

"Then, should we bet on the amount of days it'll take the next adventurer to quit? The winner will get ten gold coins."

"Please spare me from that. I'm not an adventurer, so ten gold coins is way too much!"

The new guard gave a serious complaint. As an adventurer, it certainly was an amount one could earn in a day, but for a guard like him, it was a month's worth of hard work. Nothing you would bet on something trivial like this.

"Hahaha, I'm joking. Let's do it with one gold coin then."

"That's still pretty much..."

Having his shoulder grabbed, with no chance of running away, the new guard let out a sigh.

"Then, what about one silver coin?"

"That's doable, I guess..."

It was the amount that could be used to buy dinner and drinks. It certainly wasn't an unreasonably high amount, looking at the monthly wage of being a guardsman, and he couldn't exactly allow himself to worsen this workplace relationship, so he jumped on. Seeing the hesitatingly nodding new guard, the middle-aged guard showed a gleeful smile.

"That's how it's gotta be! Oh, look at that, a new guy I haven't—"

Realizing that a new person approached the entrance, the middle-aged man's voice got cut-off, and his boastful expression froze up. The new guard got curious about this sudden change, and directed his gaze in the same direction—to be greeted with pure darkness.

"Ah—"

His voice got stuck in his throat before he could let out a scream, and even the middle-aged guard didn't laugh anymore. How could he? Past his gaze was the personified darkness, walking towards them in the form of a knight. Dark aura, almost like miasma, was leaking out of the jet-black armor, and every step, dirt was ringing up from the ground. The eyes of the helmet were like the devil's, having a weird glow, as if they were asking for blood. If he were to swing his blood-red greatsword at the two of them, he would surely hit them in half with ease.

"Ah, ah..."

Being gazed at like the prey of a beast, accepting nothing but death, the new guard's body stopped listening to him, and would only shake as he was frozen in place. At the same time, a jet-black armored knight arrived in front of the immobilized men—

Gave a slight bow, and entered the labyrinth.

"Eh?"

The new guard's eyes turned into dots, as he watched the Dark Knight's back grow more distant as such went down the stairs. Immediately after, the middle-aged guard let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Woaaaaah...W-What was that?! Like the one in the rumours I heard—"

"Uhm, he was an adventurer, right?"

"I've never seen a guy like that before?!"

"So, he's a newcomer?"

Being asked like that, the middle-aged guard tried to cover up his behaviour a second ago, and let out a grandiose snort.

"Ha, don't be ridiculous. A guy with such an aura has to be a 6th rank adventurer, or even higher."

Even after a thousand years of challenging the labyrinth, the limit in depth of it was still unknown, and the deepest that humanity managed to arrive at was the 6th floor. The adventurers that arrived at this very floor were put in the 6th rank, and were regarded as the heroes of humanity, standing at the peak of humankind. If one were to say that one 6th rank adventurer would be able to defeat 1000 soldiers, you'd be corrected by the people around you with "Isn't it supposed to be 2000?", that's just how known their actual strength is.

"Then, that person just now was of the 6th rank?"

"No mistaking it. If you see a 6th rank adventurer be serious, you'd understand that immediately."

The middle-aged man explained as a cold sweat was running down his forehead.

"If they're holding back their aura, the 6th rank adventurers aren't all that different from your normal citizen. But, once they enter their fighting stance, it's like a typhoon running wild. An average mortal like me is busy with just being able to stand during that time."

For someone that didn't know better, they might just laugh this off as over exaggerated big talk, but having been assaulted by that death god's aura



from before, the new guard could only nod along. However, there was one doubt that was plaguing him.

"I really think that he was a newcomer though."

"Huh? Don't be ridiculous, boy. Did he have the face of a newcomer or something?!"

Swallowing a 'We couldn't see that face because of the helmet though...' the new guard spoke out his assumption.

"But, he didn't have a clan badge, right?"

In the Goldot Empire, larger groups of adventurers are called clans. The bigger ones comprise around thirty people, while the smaller ones have ten members. The Senpais teach the newcomers about the ins and outs of adventuring, members exchange information on monsters and the layout of the labyrinth. Meaning, belonging to a clan brought many benefits with it, even with the membership fee to consider. After all, if one belonged to a clan, help would immediately arrive if one was decimated in the labyrinth, probably one of the biggest merits. No matter how skilled and experienced an adventurer may be, the chances of being assaulted by monsters on the way out, whilst being fatigued and unable to defend itself, aren't exactly zero. That's why, if worse came to worst, you would need comrades that could secure your dead body, and bring it to the temple so that you could be resurrected. Leaving words like 'I'm going down to the third floor to the west today. I'll be back in the evening', and you're unable to come back in time due to being defeated by monsters, another party will go on the search immediately to search for you. That's why, both experienced and newcomers for adventurers immediately search for a clan to join. The only people that wouldn't join clans are the fools who are too prideful, or the absolute amateurs that didn't know better.

"That's why, I was wondering if that person wasn't a newcomer."

"Don't be ridiculous, man."

The middle-aged guard complained, as he whacked the head of the new guard.

"As if a devil-like newcomer like him would exist in this world. And I'd be happy to bet 100 gold coins on that."

*Then, I'll accept*—the new guard wanted to say, but rather than a ten-months worth of salary, he preferred to keep a favorable workplace atmosphere.

"Also, if a newcomer wanted to become an adventurer, he'd head to the training ground first, I tell you."

Entering from the large front gate to the west, if one walked direction south east, you'd arrive at the entrance of the labyrinth right here, but by going the opposite direction, north east, there exists a training ground for adventurers of new and experienced alike. Normally, a person with rational thinking would practice there a few months time, and only then head towards the labyrinth.

"You never saw them? Those country boys, looking like they barely know anything about fighting, equipped with shabby armor and a rusty sword, heading to the training grounds after they were instructed by the guards at the gate."

"No, my home is on the eastern side, so I'm not all that familiar with it..." Feeling slightly flustered at his own inexperience and unfamiliarity of how the world worked, the new guard got lectured even further by the middle-aged guard.

"I've seen my fair share of idiots that dream of becoming rich quickly. But, around 99% of those bastards just run home to the country with hanged-low heads."

The training might be tough, but that's basically out of consideration on the instructor's side.

"Hearing about those heroes, sung about by those minstrels, makes you think that defeating monsters in the labyrinth is easy, right? But, reality is different. Would you understand if I told you that around 20% of new adventurers end up dying on their first trip?"

Even the greatest prodigy of the city, after spitting out blood and tears during his training, dies if it's his time to die. That's how the deep labyrinth works. A mere mortal might dream of making the riches, only to end up with debts for his resurrection.

"When I was younger, I went to the training grounds myself, so I understand."

"Senpai, you were aiming to become an adventurer before?!"

"Yeah, and I was shown a terribly large difference in talent."

The middle-aged guard's eyes looked into the far distance, maybe the past, as he started reminiscing.

"After all that being defeated by the instructor, all the skill I picked up from him didn't even get me down on the second floor of the labyrinth, so I gave up."

"So something like that happened..."

"But, even if the first floor is the most basic level for adventurers, just that is out of reach for us normal people. Now people like us are acting as senior guardsmen at gates."

Cursing that the salary isn't that bad, the middle-aged guard's expression went back to his serious one as he announced.

"You understand now, the labyrinth is that kind of place."

"....."

Unable to even imagine such a strict underworld, the new guard just stayed in silence as the middle-aged guard fiercely

"In the midst of all these genius-like adventurers, there are those demons that are the 6th rank. There's no way that guy just now was just a mere amateur."

"But, the badge?"

"He must've just kept it inside his armor."

“...Yes, that makes sense.”

Unable to say anything back to the sound argument of the middle-aged guard, the new guard muttered. But, although he was showing his agreement, he remembered back to the words of the legendary adventurer. —Always doubt the ‘Obvious’. Even if it goes against what you’ve learned so far, trust in your own eyes more than anything.

“That’s just how it is. You better develop some good eye for people, or you’ll never become a professional guard like me, alright?”

Although he might be unfamiliar with how the world works, the new guard certainly wasn’t inexperienced and dumb enough to retort with “That sounds pretty unfashionable”, even after seeing the middle-aged man’s shit-eating grin. But, a small part of him regretted that he didn’t bet those ten gold coins before.

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“So this is my workplace from today onward.”

Having arrived at the first floor of the labyrinth after descending those stairs, I looked around the surroundings, feeling slightly emotional. With clean-cut walls and pavement that made you look like it was created by man, the labyrinth is slightly lit up by dense lights of magical power, and it makes me reminisce about my hometown ever so slightly.

“Good thing I don’t need a torch down here.”

Needing more consumable goods would raise necessary expenses. Cutting away unnecessary expenses would bring me closer and closer to my dream of building a home.

“Still, that just now as a shame alright...” I let out a sigh as I remembered the incident that occurred a bit ago.

Thinking that I might look around the city, I headed to the second castle gate, only to be chased away by the guards. When I asked for the reason, they told me that the walls were cutting up the imperial capital into nine wards, and adventurers would only be able to go in and out of the 9th ward. At first, I was a bit disgruntled, but thinking about it, it made sense. If some scary-looking adventurers were to walk around the city, with sword and armor, that would leave the defenseless normal inhabitants in fear.

Especially knowing the evil deeds they could achieve with whatever magic they could wield. There might be those that used magic to hide their bodies, and go peeking on the woman’s bath like gramps would. Hearing that, granny punished him by crucifying upside down, but seeing through that magic seems to be pretty difficult.

But anyway, for peace preservation, adventurers weren’t allowed in the city. All the inns and drinking bars that adventurers would fancy are located in the 9th ward anyway, and although life doesn’t seem to be lacking in any way here, but, unable to enter my dream city even while having it right in front of me is truly vexing.

"Maybe by offering a large sum of donations, or by entering the military and retiring as an adventurer, you might get a passing or living permission there..."

I don't want to fight other people when I become a soldier. Hence, the only other option was to make the riches by fighting my way through this labyrinth.

"The money for the land, the building, as well as the donation fees...Should be around 100.000 gold coins?"

Just by imagining that large sum, I felt a sigh escape my lips yet again. I wonder if it's even possible to earn that much money. No, doubting about it won't change anything. I have work to do right now.

Making up my determination, I moved deeper into the labyrinth.

"Still, this place really is huge."

Wide passageways which you could fill with around ten adults that spread out their arms at the same time, deep enough that you can't see the end of it with your own eyes. If it wasn't riddled with monsters, you could use this place to build an underground city even.

Walking down the pavement, I was always wary of a surprise attack, my back to the wall, killing the sound of my footsteps. And, after turning right at a corner, the sight of monsters greeted me.

"Three enemies, two kobolds and one nord."

With the head of a dog, a stature about half the size of a grown man, a crude weapon in hand, the kobolds. At the same time, also decorated with a doggish face, about the size of a grown man, equipped with a sword and shield, a nord.

I read about them in gramps' field guide, but seeing them like this was the first time. While tension filled my body, I readied my sword, and sneaked up to them. Maybe it's because my jet-black armor was mixing in with the pure darkness filling the surroundings, the monsters showed no signs of spotting me.

*That's gramps for you, this armor is amazing.*

But even more than that, this armor is so cool-looking! Not to mention this matte black color of the armor. But anyway, enough gratitude for gramps. I kicked off the ground, and cut straight through the two kobolds from behind.

"Gya?!"

Having finally realized my presence, the nord hurriedly readied its sword, but it was already too late. I lifted up my sword, and cut him in half, straight from the head down to the tail.

—I can't do anything?!

Seemed to be the feeling behind its expression, as the nord quickly broke down into pieces, the light scattering everywhere. The same happened to the corpses of the kobolds, and as silence returned to the passageway, I let out a sigh of relief.

"I won."



Gramps and master both spared me a lot of times, and even after some very realistic fighting training, I still couldn't help but feel nervous. Deciding that it would be better to get used to this feeling quickly, I looked down at the ground where the monsters' bodies had been before.

"Oh, that's it."

At the place where the nord had been standing before, I found an object that looked similar to a glass shard, and I gleefully picked that up.

Monsters, being born in an atmosphere dense of magical power, are basically bodies of energy, and although they might hold intelligence, they don't have any physical body. As a result, being defeated like this, they scatter, as well as the equipment they were holding.

However, the highly compressed magical power is left behind as a substance, which are these magic stones. It has its own value as a beautiful gem, but they are even higher valued as material for tools that use magic power, magic tools, and they can be sold at a fairly high price.

"But, this one looks rather cheap, huh."

The magic stone I got from the nord was about the size of wheat grain, a dull red grey. The magic stone that gramps had was the size of a watermelon, and it was shining with the colors of a rainbow. This doesn't compare to that at all.

"Still, it's one step forward."

It's the source of my income, and the first time I earned money for myself. They certainly can't call me jobless anymore. As pride filled my chest, I put the magic stone in the pouch at my hip.

"Alright, time for the next one."

Feeling more motivated than ever, I silently moved forward again. But, turning at the next crossing, I spotted a door, and even as I entered the room, I couldn't spot any other monsters.

"Is it because I just defeated some?"

I heard that monsters never completely disappeared from the labyrinth until now, but it seems like they don't immediately reappear after they were defeated. Maybe some other adventurers already cleared the path I had been taking.

"What a blunder, I should've gone the other way."

That being said, this is yet another important experience. To remember the layout of the labyrinth, let's just go wherever I can. Deciding on that, I walked down the passageway in a straight manner as I heard a tumult a bit further away from me.

"What?"

Thinking that something was fishy, so I walked forwards with hushed footsteps. Arriving at the front of a corner, I found a group of five adventurers fighting against a huge monster.

"Nah, a group of six, huh."

Behind the monster was a young chainmail-wearing man, collapsed on the floor. Blood was dripping from his head, and he showed no movement

whatsoever, but concentrating my eyes on his aura, I could see it, although faintly. Thank god, he's just unconscious, but not dead. That being said, he won't be able to fight in this battle again. And the other five seemed to have realized that, as panic was filling their expressions.

"Time to save—No, hold on."

I stopped my legs that were about to kick off the ground, and I started thinking. If I were to jump in and defeat the monster, would they get angry at me for stealing their prey? Maybe I should go and offer my help first...No, it could rob them off their focus in battle right now, and they might get wiped out.

"Ah, what should I do...!"

It would've been great if there was some training ground that taught me the manners of being an adventurer, but I guess that is too much to ask for. Even a plain country boy like me knew that very well.

"But, at this rate..."

While I was hesitating, the group of five were being pushed back by the toughness of the giant monster. I can't exactly turn on my heel and leave them there, but I don't know if I can just...! Ah, I know!

"I just have to help them in a way that they won't realize!"

A nice idea, I do have to say. Hence, I grabbed the hilt of my greatsword, and approached the battlefield as my body slowly disappeared in the darkness of my surroundings.

\*

A troll—skin color akin to the one of mud, a stature about two times the height of a normal person, and while it's movement might be slow, he's rocking immense power, and with his lack of pain and exhaustion, his endurance makes it a great threat. In the midst of all the monsters that tend to appear on the first floor, it is without a doubt the strongest foe you could encounter. And, having their male fighter receive a surprise attack from that troll and having him collapse was the first misfortune for the group.

"Shit!"

The leader, a knight, let out cursing words, as he dodged the right hand of the troll, coming swinging at him. And, having his own sword lit up with overflowing aura, he slashed at the enemy.

Basic Sword Magic - Ray Edge

It was a simple skill to heighten the sharpness of the sword, but it brought enough effectiveness to strike down a goblin with a single strike. However, the skin of the troll was as tough as leather armor, and the blade stopped without cutting through bone.

"Tch!"

The male knight clicked his tongue as he jumped out of the way, and this time it was a female warrior that rammed her weapon into the troll's thigh. However, that didn't deliver a fatal wound either, and, without showing any signs of having pain, the troll continued to throw his fists at them.

With these strong, yet large swipes, they would not hit them if they were prepared for them, and since they're inflicting small wounds one at a time, it might look like the group of adventurers had the upper hand. Unluckily, the ones that were closer to being finished was indeed that very group. After all, the resources called physical strength and focus, as well as their aura were slowly but steadily declining.

"This won't end good, let's run away!"

Having used up all these arrows, the male hunter standing in the back was now unable to do anything as he let out a despairing scream.

"We should fall back before we get annihilated."

At the same time, the male magician, equally having used up all his aura, calmly deduced after analyzing the situation.

"But, we can't leave Bea behind like that!"

The female priest screamed at the top of her lungs, and pointed at the male warrior that lay collapsed in the back of the troll. But, the male hunter and male magician did not change their opinion.

"We can just run away and have our Senpais from the clan help us out!"

"Right. If we all get wiped out here, we will not be able to come up with the fee for the resurrection."

Monsters don't hold any appetite, unlike living beings, hence they would never devour the corpses of the deceased. That's why, leaving the dead bodies there for a few days wouldn't be dramatical. Not to mention, this wasn't the sixth floor, but rather the very first one, so even without having their seniors from the clan come to rescue, someone might just pass by and retrieve it.

Still, the costs for the resurrection at the temple were running about a hundred gold coins. If they couldn't afford that, they would be forced to ask their seniors in the clan, but falling into debt would get them excommunicated from the clan itself.

Seeing it like that, running away here was definitely the most logical choice they had. However, humans are beings that mostly act on feelings, not on logic and reason.

"This isn't a problem of money! He's our comrade!"

What was reflected in the eyes of the female priest was the feeling of friendship.

"Just because that Bea got done in doesn't mean that our whole party has to pay for it!"

"This is why I hate emotional women."

"What did you say, cold-blooded coward!"

They had already forgotten about the monster right in front of them, starting a war of slander. Having the duty to put the disputing party into their place, the so-called leader, the male knight, didn't say a word, and just continued to fight the troll as he clicked his tongue. Truthfully, he didn't have the leisure to stand still and scream at them, but it was his fault from the beginning that the situation ended up like that. Until now, they had

fought hordes of goblins and kobolds, and even though their aura was starting to run low, this was the result of “Let’s move a bit further”. Even after being told “Immediately pull back when you think you can **still** keep going”, he disregarded that, and thus ending up a failure of a leader, bringing his party into this miserable situation.

At the very least, he wanted to defeat the troll right in front of him, and rescue the fallen comrade in front of him—

Bad luck and bad luck come back to haunt him, and he’d surely be scolded by his seniors at the clan, but he didn’t have any time to realize his missteps.

“Guha!”

Physical strength ran out in the faltering female warrior, and a right hook of the troll sent her flying.

“Egrette?!”

Only able to watch her limp body smash against the wall, as any movement of hers stopped, the other three let out a scream of despair. However, the male knight didn’t fall back, but instead jumped off the ground, forwards.

“Uoaaaaaaah!”

Using the arm of the troll as a jumping paddle, who let down it’s guard after knocking out the female warrior, he jumped at the enemy’s head. And, taking out a magic scroll from his pocket—magic tools that have a one-time usage of magic inside them, he pushed it against the troll’s face.

“Roam free, ‘Fireball’!”

Responding to the chant that he spit out, the scroll let loose a giant explosion. A thunderous roar reverberated, and after the dust cleared up, the body of the troll came in sight, missing it’s head.

“I did it!”

Before the male knight could even land back on his feet, the troll’s headless body scattered into all directions, turning into particles of light. That very light wandered towards the bodies of the survivors, and slightly heightened their aura. Awakening to the feeling of growth, the male knight could barely stand up on his numb legs, as the other three behind him let out voices of cheering.

“What are you, some sort of acrobat?”

“Although it’s good that we won, we definitely should have retreated just now.”

“Come on, don’t sweat the small stuff.”

The male knight returned a bitter smile, as his comrades gathered in front of him.

“Anyway, let’s hurry and pick up Bea and Egrette—Hya!”

Not just the male knight, but even the rest of the group let out a shriek filled with terror. It must have heard the sounds of nearby battle. From the corner of the passageway a bit further away, another troll looked around the corner with it’s grotesque head.

—Found you~

His ugly and hard to look at face was distorted in pleasure, as it looked at the group.

"You're kidding me..."

Left with neither aura nor a magic scroll, the short lived feeling of victory turned into oppression and despair, breaking their hearts in two. Having lost even the willpower to run away, the troll was just mercilessly heading towards them, and raised it's giant fist—

—Until it got sliced into two pieces, going down from head to toe.

".....Huh?"

Still flashing it's confident smile, the troll turned into particles of light, while the male knight could only watch in awe. Once again, he could feel his aura growing, but he certainly didn't have the time to enjoy that.

"What...just happened?"

While being lost on what to believe, the male knight recalled the scene he had just witnessed. The moment the troll was cut in half, although it had been in pitch black darkness, he felt like he saw some dark light coming down on the enemy.

*Did it get slashed by some aura blade?*

For them, who barely made it through the first floor, skills like 'Ray Edge' that could heighten the sharpness of the sword were all they could use, but if one were to mention the higher ranked adventurers, they could certainly swing down, or shoot out an aura blade, possessing the necessary sword magic. If one was of the 6th rank, he had heard that it was possible to pour aura into the ground from one's blade, skewering the enemy from below in one fell swoop.

*And at the same time, you could even do this downwards from the ceiling...*

The male knight looked up at the ceiling, only to forcefully push down his view right below at his feet not even a second later.

"Leader?"

"Don't look!"

Letting out a slightly panicked order, the leader quickly jogged to the female warrior.

"I'll carry Egrette, so you guys take care of Bea!"

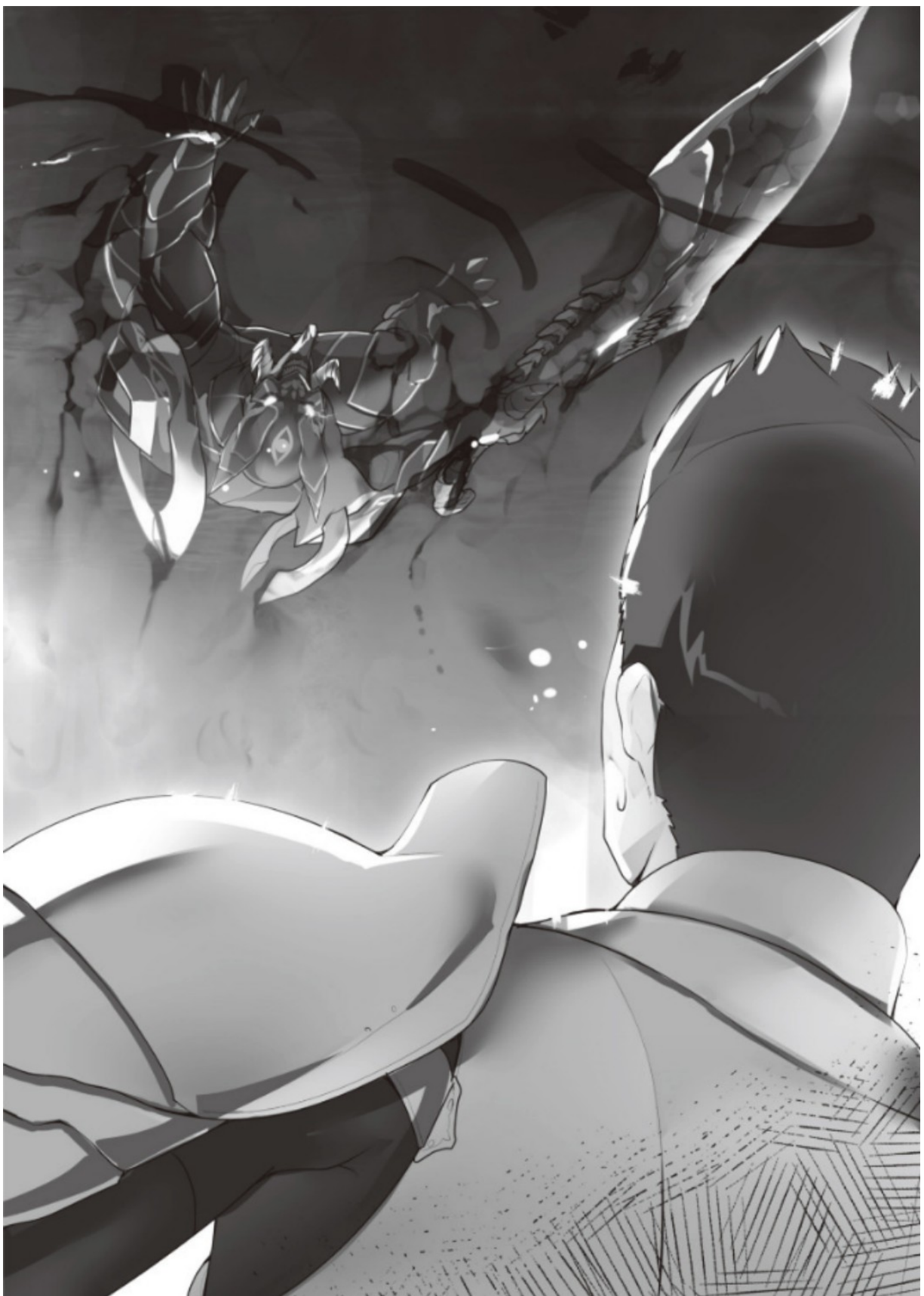
"Y-Yeah, if you say so..."

"Alright then, let's hurry!"

Ignoring the slight confusion of his comrades, the male knight started walking on fast feet while carrying the female warrior in his hands.

*W-What was that?!?!*

Pushing the urge to scream down his throat, he remembered back to the sight he just witnessed. On top of the high ceiling of the labyrinth, a jet black armored knight was resting his body like a spider, staring down at them. Whether that was a human, or a demon, he did not know. There was only one thing he was sure about.



At ridiculously high speed, to make sure that nobody would realize, that thing split the immense trill in half in mere fragments of a second, and if it wanted to, it could murder his own group without blinking twice.

*P-Please, just let us go...!*

His teeth were chattering with fear, and his heartbeat was going rampant at a level that it started to hurt. Frightened that that thing would be able to hear that to chase them, he passed beneath the armored knight.

*It's not attacking? Maybe we're not even worth killing, huh*

He didn't feel any anger at being underestimated, or the like. Just, he was joyful rather, that his life was spared. But, there was one doubt that flew into his mind.

*I couldn't really see it that clearly, but...was that a Dark Knight?*

A helmet that looked like the face of the devil, jet black armor like the darkness surrounding them, a greatsword, looking like it was drenched in blood. Even in those thousand years since the foundation of the Empire, the ones that had seen him directly could be counted on one hand. However even so, tales remain, and those that survived the fight told that the sight alone was weakening their morale.

The roadblock of humanity's path, the ultimate wall, guarding the depths of the labyrinth.

*No, there's no way a guardian of the 6th floor should be up here!*

The male knight shook his head to the side, desperately trying to shake off that thought. The appearing monsters were set on the different floors, and he never heard of them moving up the floors. But then, what was that thing, that looked almost identical to the Dark Knight? Even if he did not know, one thing was for certain.

*Time to stop being an adventurer I'm really not suited for this...*

He ignored any reason, only focussed on his pride, which almost led to the decimation of his party as a result of that. Seeing that, he was painfully reminded that he wasn't made to be an adventurer, nor did he have the right to lead a party like this.

—And now, with self-conceit filling your chest, you've come one step closer to being an adventurer.

He certainly couldn't see his seniors from the clan laugh at him like that. Right now, he had his hands full heading to the exit of the labyrinth with his comrades.

Watching the backs grow more distant of those, the jet black armored knight descended from the ceiling. Taking a step forward, he picked up the two magic stones left behind by the deceased troll corpses.

"Umm, you forgot something."

Snatching away the prey was something he couldn't do, but chasing after them right now to hand it over was also impossible. That being said, leaving it here would be a waste of good money and resources.

Funny enough, the male knight had no way of knowing what kind of trivial emotional dilemma this young man, wearing this fearful Dark Knight armor, actually was.

\*

"Huh, today wasn't all that successful."

Having stepped out from the gloomy labyrinth out into the open, the evening sky was colored bright red, as I made my way towards the inn for adventurers. Even after I saved that group of six down there, I tried wandering around the labyrinth for a bit, but I didn't find anything worthwhile, besides five kobolds. Instead, I spotted three adventurer parties, so they probably cleared the floor before me.

"Guess I have to enter the labyrinth earlier, or I won't earn anything."

Mumbling that to myself, I passed the castle gate, and arrived at the inn.

"It sure is lively."

A two-floor building inn, and as I heard loud noises coming from the tavern, probably from the adventurers after their long day at work, I let out a sigh of admiration. During my travels from my hometown to the imperial capital, I passed a lot of smaller cities, but never did I rest at an inn this lively.

"Even though it's outside the city, filled with only adventurers, it still feels like a metropole."

I was a bit worried after seeing that nothing was around the labyrinth and the west gate, but that proved to be needless fear. Feeling encouraged ever so slightly, I scoured for a place. There are those lodgings that are made for newcomers, cheap and basic, and those for more experienced adventurers, more luxurious. Together with a bar on the first floor, it's the perfect place to spend the night. Entering the deeper parts of the main street, there are apartments designed for longer stays, and even individual mansions.

"That must've cost a thousand gold coins."

Maybe there's a veteran living there, having earned himself that mansion after visiting the labyrinth for tens of years?

Looking up at it with a gaze of envy, I once again swore to myself that I would definitely build a home myself, near the castle walls.

"For now, let's look for a place to eat something."

Deciding on that, I headed towards a lodging called 'Eternal Maiden Pavillon'. The moment I opened the double door, the smell of grilled flesh and alcohol, as well as the floor of adventurers greeted me.

"Lady, give me two more portions of ale and—Huh?!"

"It's still too early to challenge the guardian of the second floor—Eek!"

What happened? The adventurers suddenly stopped their conversations, and started staring at me...Did I violate some dress code?! No, it didn't say anything about 'No full-body armor allowed' or anything, and there are other people that are wearing similar armor, and they're probably just interested in a newcomer like me.



Since I started feeling a bit embarrassed, I hurriedly made my way to the back of the store, to the counter, and was about to call out to what seemed to be the owner, a middle-aged woman, built like a bear.

"I'd like a room—"

"Bastard!"

The moment I took out my purse, I could hear an agitated voice behind my back. Turning around in surprise, a young girl wearing an oriental-styled armor with a black ponytail put one hand on the tachi on her waist, and glared at me.

"What's your plan with this!"

Umm...I wanted to rent a lodging for the night...Maybe there is some sort of dress code here?

As I was a bit perplexed, the black haired girl sharpened her gaze even further as she glared at me.

"I really think I am wrong here, but you have the same appearance!"

There's somebody that looks like me? Someone has some nice sense I see!

Woah, I'm so happy that someone also likes this sort of armor and helmet combination! Leaving aside my various stops during my travels, even after seeing nobody here in this big city being equipped like me, I was starting to get worried that a black armor might make me look lame, but it's reassuring that I'm not alone.

Wanting to ask where I could find that person, I took one step forward—in response, the black haired girl jumped off, and put strength in the hand that was holding the grip.

"You're moving forward like it's nothing, huh."

Eh, should I not have moved or something? But, I really wanted to know about that person so that we could exchange our tastes concerning black armors...

Feeling disheartened, I let out a deep sigh.

"How relaxed he is, being in front of god-speed Chidori!"

"This is the bloodlust of a 6th ranker, you know? Even just watching from the side like this makes me shiver down to the bone..."

"I want to lick Chidori-tan's ponytail."

The people around us started to get noisy, but their voices were overlapping so much that I couldn't pick up everything. But, fortunately, or rather, unfortunately, I perfectly grasped what that last pervert said. Thanks to this magic, I have perfect round vision even in this mask, but it's still tough to pick up sounds from the outside. Next time I get back to my hometown, I better have gramps improve in that regard.

"Interesting!"

As I was thinking about future plans, the black-haired beauty had a facial expression of joy, and threw a purse at my feet. The clinging sound of coins hitting the ground resounded. And, there was even a cute embroidery of a little bird on there. Completely contrary to her looks, it was rather girly.

But, what exactly did she mean to achieve by that?

"Enough for a resurrection and some nuisance money. With this, you can't complain, can you."

The girl stated that towards me tilting my head in confusion, and she followed up by strengthening the aura in her entire body.

Huh? This posture and flow of aura is—

"Now, accept this!"

As I was still at a loss on what was going on, the girl unsheathed her tachi. Longer than an uchigatana, she pulled it out with beautiful movement, but I didn't have the time to admire that. Keeping up the momentum from having pulled the sword out, the naked blade closed in on my face, slightly tilted—but I ignored that, and guarded my torso with my right arm. The blade in front of my eyes disappeared like mist, and I felt the impact at the exact place I was guarding.

Good thing I didn't misread that. Well, she didn't seem all that serious, contrary to her words, and even if I took a slash at my head, I probably would've made it through this unscathed thanks to the helmet. But, having this super cool helmet get scarred in any way would probably leave me in depression for three days and three nights, so I still was glad that she didn't aim for it.

In the meantime, the girl put her tachi back into the scabbard around her waist, and had a rather stern expression on her face.

"You knew?"

Yeah, I did know, but why are you so angry about that?

On a side note, this skill right now was a *feint*, where she'd show signs of attacking my head, sending out a fake blade with aura, while she would aim at my torso with the real blade. Using the momentum of drawing the blade out of the scabbard, it's easy to mistake the aura blade for the real one, and if someone saw this for the first time, it'd probably end bad for them. And even if one saw it for a second time, one could still swing the fake decoy at the exact same trajectory like the real blade, or put enough lethality in the aura blade, bringing down an attack at the same time on the head and torso, and other variations here and there, making this a skill with high adaptability.

"There shouldn't be any other user in this vicinity besides me."

Throwing me a doubtful gaze, the black-haired girl once again readied herself to draw the sword.

...Not good, she's serious now. If I receive the next attack, even this armor won't get off without some scars. Even if newcomers are received a bit more roughly around here, isn't this going a bit too far? I was about to call out to her, asking if we could settle this with words, as suddenly...

"Let's leave it at that."

A giant fist came crashing down on the girl's head.

"Hyau!"

Letting out a lovable shriek, the girl crouched down, and behind her was the tall inn proprietress, who had been watching from the counter until

now...I never felt any movement from her...And this movement...is she some karate ninja?! I heard from gramps and master about existences like those, but to think that I would get to see them with my own eyes.

Giving a sigh of gratitude, the inn proprietress was busy scolding the black-haired girl.

"If you're planning on taking it any further, then how about I play with you?"

The inn proprietress showed some crazy strength, as even the tables around us started to shake because of her overflowing aura. Being overwhelmed with that, even the noisy adventurers around us got quiet in mere seconds. Amazing. With this much strength, she's more fit to be an adventurer, rather than some inn proprietress like this.

"Anyway, I'm sorry that a guest of ours troubled you like this."

Saying that, the inn proprietress took out the key to a room. Taking out my purse, and paying the fee, I received said key.

"Thanks for your patronage. Want something to eat?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll bring something to your room later. And, let me tell you one thing."

I wonder what it is? I tilted my head in anticipation, as the inn proprietress not so gracefully tapped herself on the chest.

"If you ever dare call me an old lady, I'll send you flying, making you wish you'd stay up there in heaven, alright? Call me inn proprietress or eternal maiden!"

...Is that supposed to make me laugh?

\*

Watching the jet black armored knight trot up the stairs, one of the 6th rankers of the strongest clan 'White Wing', the female samurai godspeed Chidori complained.

"Are you really going to let some suspicious person like him stay over?"

"As long as he pays, even the devil can stay over. That's our policy."

The inn proprietress answered with a relaxed expression, and handed over the purse, that the black knight didn't pick up, back to Chidori.

"I'll overlook things today, but the next time, you'll get kicked out, okay."

"Hmpf..."

Being hit where it hurt, Chidori sunk down on the ground like a dog that was getting scolded. Chidori was a 6th ranker, having earned enough money to afford a huge mansion where she was living with her friends, so getting kicked out wasn't exactly problematic for her. However, in this imperial capital that uses wheat as their main source of food, this Eternal Maiden brings out oriental food, based on rice. Looking as gallant as she was, Chidori was quite the glutton, and losing the taste of her birthplace would be unbearable for her.

"My humble apologies, I hereby swear that it will never happen again."

"It's fine as long as you understand. Go and eat dinner already."

The inn proprietress just showed a faint smile towards Chidori, who gave a deep bow, and returned back to the kitchen to prepare the food for the armored knight. The second she disappeared, the surroundings suddenly exploded.

"What was that just now?! That was the Dark Knight, right?!"

"No way, it was probably just some idiot that was wearing a costume."

"But, he managed to defend against Chidori's skill like that, so maybe..."

Ignoring the loud adventurers to her left and right, Chidori made her way back to the table. Sitting across from her was a member of her party, an orc male warrior, Willow, greeting her with a smile.

"So even Mrs. Godspeed can't win against the inn proprietress, I see."

"Be quiet."

Pouting her lips in a sulking manner, Chidori started biting down on the now cold grilled fish menu, when Willow started talking to her once again.

"Still, the inn proprietress really is shrewd."

With that woman's true ability, she might have even been able to stop Chidori as she even put her hand on the grip of her tachi. Still, the same could be said for the pseudo Dark Knight, having stopped Chidori's attack. And, the inn proprietress probably wanted to see the strength of that man.

"So, I was used as a front man?"

"It's your fault for suddenly charging in like that."

Sipping on the kelp soup stock in a disgruntled manner, Willow brought down flawless logic.

"But, if you didn't move, then I probably would have gone in your stead."

Willow's red eyes were burning with a fighting spirit.

"We of all people would not be able to keep quiet and watch as a bastard that looked like the Dark Knight himself appeared."

"Indeed." Chidori nodded.

Unlike the normal adventurer that had only heard about him in stories, the members of White Wing have met the guardian of the 6th floor in person, facing him even. Without any other choice, they were obliterated, using up their magic stones and their equipment to cast the secret art to return above ground, although being dead bodies. The resurrection may have succeeded, but they had to walk around the city completely naked in shame as they returned from the temple, and the additional pain of having lost around 300.000 gold coins worth of magic stones and equipment hasn't vanished until now.

"Chidori, was that the real deal?"

"If you're asking if he was the guardian of the 6th floor, then the answer is no." Chidori gave a quick response.

Holding strength equal to a hero class, the Dark Knight managed to kill all five members of Chidori's group back then. In return, she didn't feel this overwhelming pressure and strength from this pseudo Dark Knight.

"However, he is not some cheap fake either."

Though she held back from going full force, the person inside managed to hold off Chidori's drawing cut, and the armor got away with any scar whatsoever.

"Did you realize? When that man was walking, his feet didn't make any sound."

"Yeah, just like the real one."

Willow remembered back to when he was sliced in half from behind his back, not having perceived any sounds whatsoever. It might be obvious, but the metallic armor that Chidori and Willow were wearing made rattling sounds wherever they walked. That being said, their equipment was adjusted and an individual order, so the sounds they made were still much more silent than the average adventurer.

The greater mass of adventurers were equipped with normal armor or plate metal, filling the passageways with the sounds of their rattling armor, and that would make them a target for any stray kobolds and other sharp monsters down in the labyrinth. But, the armor of the pseudo Dark Knight did not make any sounds at all.

"It's without a doubt a magic tool of the highest level."

Willow clicked his tongue. Magic tools were normal tools and equipment with magical power flowing through them, but they are still differentiated in 'Consumable Tools' and 'Permanent Tools'.

Those consumable tools were, just as their name suggested, a one-time use, cheap imitations, and magic scrolls with 'Fireball' and 'Heal' were the great representatives of that group. Being crystals of magic, magic stones were basic ingredients, and as long as one had a certain number of them, creating those goods was a simple treat. Seeing that the Goldot Empire had the deep labyrinth right next doors, it made sense that their magic scroll supply was immense. Especially because these magic scrolls can be used by a normal soldier is what makes them so valuable.

On the other hand, permanent tools were tools that had a continuous supply of magic. For example, a lamp infused with the 'Light' magic wasn't dependent on oil and flame, and would continuously deliver a light source until it broke down. Tools like those would suck up the magical power around it, and turn that into magic. Just explaining it like that may make it sounds very simple, but in reality, it's comparable to work of the gods.

Humans themselves would gather the magical power around them in the atmosphere, and manipulate that to generate strength inside their bodies, changing it into the so-called aura. With that, they could use sword magic or other spells, enabling the fight against monsters.

Anyway, that is the same principle for permanent tools. Basically, trying to create a permanent magic tool was comparable to trying to create an immortal sorcerer. With those god-like tricks necessary, even a 6th rank sorcerer in the Goldot Kingdom had no hopes in recreating that. Hence, it makes sense to assume that human-made permanent tools do not exist. But,

if it was inside the dense of magical power, mysterious labyrinth, gaining those tools was the only other option to earn them.

"He might have defeated the real Dark Knight, and picked up his equipment?"

"Impossible. There's higher credibility with believing that he received it from a kind fairy of the lake."

Chidori shut down Willow's joke with a frown. Monsters, being lumps of magic basically, scattered into thin particles of light as they were defeated, leaving behind only those valuable magic stones. At the same time, equipment that they were holding could stay behind as those natural magic tools. These natural magic tools could come in forms of metal and steel, holding incredible sharpness or power in them, incomparable to normal equipment, making them worth thousands of gold coins, which equaled a ten-years worth of monthly salary of a normal soldier.

In the midst of that, those objects which acted as permanent magic tools had enough value to them to be able to build your own castle even.

"It was robust enough to withstand a godspeed drawing skill, with the permanent enchantment 'Silence' to it. If you went down with the price, you could still easily pay it off for about 300.000 gold coins."

The upper nobles that lived in the 3rd ward had to pay that amount to build up their houses, but there must be those that desperately wanted such an object for themselves.

Willow, with a similar body stature himself, might have offered all the assets he owned, ignored the fact that it had the same design as the armor of the Dark Knight, and went down to prostrate himself to receive that armor.

"Should we just kill him and take it?"

And it wasn't just Willow that had similar thoughts. Some people seemed to have grasped the value of that armor as well, and after watching the pseudo Dark Knight step up to the second floor, they started to get more noisy with their plans. Though, in this inn, where the inn proprietress kept a watchful eye, you'd get your head and torso sent separately to the temple.

At the same time, there were those that thought they could attempt everything inside the dark labyrinth, with no guarding, but with this jet-black armor that stands out like a light in the dark, tracing the robbery back to them was no big feat.

And, in this Goldot Empire, where you could find healing and resurrection as long as you had the money, murderers and so on didn't find much punishment, but things were different for murder during robbery. As soon as the deceased person was resurrected, he could give a testimony, the crime exposed, so the robbers can't just kill off the person, but have to dispose of the corpse at the same time. But, if that came to light, the perpetrators would receive carnal punishment. To name it, a fire burial while they were still alive, denying them any hope of being resurrected. And Chidori knew very well that Willow wasn't the kind of fool that would take the risk. But, better be safe than sorry.

“Better not. The person inside can’t be underestimated either.”

It wasn’t a coincidence that he stopped Chidori’s drawing sword skill like that. Even though he might not be able to rival the true Dark Knight, he had a certain set of skills to be wary about, no doubt. At the very least, those boastful third ranked buy s at the table next to them would be sent flying.

“With amor akin to the real deal, and high potential and power that can’t be underestimated...Now, just who is that man”

“No clue.”

Chidori calmly answered Willow’s question. They didn’t have enough clues to perfectly pin him down just yet.

“That’s why we need to be wary about his motives.”

With the appearance of the Dark Knight, provoking every living adventurer in this city, he certainly couldn’t be here to earn money. Chidori didn’t know what kind of evil deeds he might have been planning, but he wasn’t someone that you could let roam free without proper surveillance.

Willow on his part was gulping down some ale, as he put his thoughts into words.

“I know, what if he was a retired sixth rank.”

“What?”

“Being a former sixth rank would explain his abilities, right?” Willow said, as he gazed at the sturdy muscles that the inn proprietress was rocking.

She herself was a former adventurer as well, and the person legends spoke out, being able to walk around the sixth floor all by herself. It was a mystery as to why she retired at a young age to become an inn proprietress, but a lot of average looking people turn out to be heroes in the sheets.

“You might have denied it, but it could be someone that indeed defeated the Dark Knight, acquired his equipment, and left the city.”

“.....”

Chidori couldn’t say anything back to Willow’s assumption.

—Fighting countless heroes, there’s no way that the Dark Knight wasn’t beaten at least once during those thousand years.

Rumours were saying that maybe there was someone that managed to deliver the final blow to the Dark Knight. And the rumours continue—

After defeating the Dark Knight, thereafter lies the seventh floor, the deepest floor of the deep labyrinth. Those that arrive at this floor will receive fulfillment of whatever they are wishing for. It’s an unbelievable story akin to a fairy-tale, but looking at the deep labyrinth, which produces monsters and magic stones out of nothing but air basically, it does make it sound more credible.

But, it would explain the reason why those that defeated the Dark Knight kept that very fact a secret, trying to keep monopole on this miracle, and disappeared from the city. Nobody knew if that legend was true or not.

However, seeing that nobody has bested this death god called Dark Knight, nobody could prove this rumour as wrong, leaving everyone with a grain of

hope that they could achieve their dreams by making it through the labyrinth. Naturally, Chidori was one of those.

"Maybe one of the 6th ranks that defeated that Dark Knight—No, a 7th rank I guess. Anyway, he came back to the city for whatever complicated reason, maybe trying to gather attention as he's walking around with that armor?"

"....."

As Willow continued in loquacity, Chidori stayed in silence. For one moment, she remembered the face of a man that had left her and her comrades back to disappear, but she quickly shook her head to rid herself of this thought.

"It cannot be. There is nobody that has bested the Dark Knight thus far." Not even after those thousand years. Hence—

"I will be the one to defeat him."

If other people heard this from just anybody, they would laugh it off as idiotic enthusiasm. Yet, this was the girl with devilish talent, which made it to the 6th floor with her young 18 years, godspeed Chidori.

As Willow watched Chidori, fully convinced that she would be able to do that, he let out yet another joke.

"That Dark Knight is all you can think about, right. Why don't you just go out with him?"

As he spoke out those words, he pointed to the stairs to the second floor, to which Chidori disagreeably narrowed her brows.

"Keep dreaming. I have decided to only be connected to a beautiful prince ever since I was little. I couldn't care less about a man whose face I don't even know!"

"I didn't expect such a maiden-like side to you."

Not befitting the title of a fierce fighting god, Willow watched this girly, or at worse even clumsy female warrior in front of him, and let out a sigh. In response, Chidori showed signs of anger as she pouted with her lips.

"Hmpf, I don't want to be told things like that by someone from the orc race who can only talk about fighting and beautiful women."

"It's burned into our brains, so I can't deny that."

As he responded, Willow went to order another portion of ale, and although he was of the orc race, he held much intellect, making him not very orc-like.

"But, let me just say one thing. What you humans think of as a beauty is completely different from what we orcs see as one, alright."

"Really? I totally thought that you preferred slender, pure white elves—"

"No!"

Willow rammed down his fist on the table, stopping Chidori mid-sentence. A loud sound ran through the room, and the grey skin of the orc started to run red out of anger.

"As if we strong orcs had any sort of sexual desire for those forest bean sprouts! It's nothing but trouble for us that you humans always have the wrong idea about us!"



Those erotic novels, where the beautiful elf is getting violated by the ugly orcs, are very popular, even in the Goldot Empire.

"The color of elves is so white it's actually making me feel sick, and they don't have any muscle at all, making them nothing short of weaklings in our eyes, and although they might have a high aura since their birth, they just yell magic chants behind my backs, not having any courage to be ready and shed blood on the front lines like we do. All the time, they're just acting all high and mighty with their beauty and long lifespan! Those weakling bean sprouts should actually beg us to protect them!"

Letting the elves say their opinion, they saw the orcs' grey skin as pretty unpleasant, always on and on about muscles. In the elves' eyes, orcs were just barbarians out for blood. Naturally, this coincidence about the other race drove a deep nail between them.

"Then, what kind of girl is more to your liking?"

As Chidori asked, Willow relaxed a bit and gave a serious answer.

"Pretty simple, a strong woman that can birth strong children."

And, he sent a passionate gaze at the strong muscular build of the inn proprietress.

"H-Huh..."

What poor food for you—is what Chidori wanted to comment, but that would have gained her another enthusiastic lecture from the orc across her, and a shuriken fork in the back of the head by the self-proclaimed eternal maiden, so she decided to keep it in her thoughts.

"But, from the logic of that, female knights would be your type, right?"

"There is no man that would dislike a strong, fierce female knight, right?"

Though their image of a female knight was varying from a princess-like girl to a gorilla-like girl, Chidori did not realize that, and just nodded along.

And, while the two of them were talking past each other during their idle gossip, other guests quickly dashed out of the inn, in order to tell their friends and comrades about the incident. Around the time the date changed, every adventurer in the city had heard about the Dark Knight (?).

# Chapter 1: Thus Meet the Jet-Black and Snow White

"Alright, time to work hard today as well."

Having gotten a good night's sleep in the inn room, I got up before the morning sun started rising, and headed to the labyrinth. Yesterday, it probably was because I entered the labyrinth too late, but I didn't earn close enough to what I would have liked. Hence, I have to get in early, and earn ten-fold from yesterday. Filling my belly with the remainders of the food I was carrying, I put on my armor, picked up my sword, and left my room.

As I stepped down the stairs on the first floor, the sights of the adventurers from yesterday had disappeared, and all that was left was that inn proprietress, mopping the floor.

"Morning. You're early I see."

"Good morning."

The inn proprietress realized my presence and stopped her work, to which I returned her greeting.

"I love it when people get to sleep early, and wake up early. Most adventurers just drink until late night, and sleep until late noon, you see. Can't follow their example, alright?"

"Ahahaha."

I gave a wholehearted laugh towards the inn proprietress' small talk. As a country boy, I didn't have that many friends and acquaintances, so I can't help but put myself on guard with the people from the city here, but that's not the case with this hearty inn proprietress. Really weird.

"By the way, you got some water and food on you?"

"No?"

"That won't do!"

As I shook my head to gesture along my response, the inn proprietress quickly dashed behind the counter.

"Because it's a bother to keep it on you, a lot of newcomers tend to just leave it behind, but if you're getting lost somewhere, in hunger and thirst, you'll get killed by monsters if you can't muster up any strength."

Is that so? From when I was walking down there yesterday, it felt much more narrow than above ground in the streets, and the structure wasn't too complicated to get lost in, I feel like.

Watching me tilt my head in confusion, and slight disagreement, the inn proprietress clicked her tongue as she was shaking her finger back and forth in front of me.

"It's fine if you're calmly walking through the passageways. But, if you happen to encounter a large quantity of monsters, and have to run away, you won't be able to calmly remember your surroundings, and you're lost in the nick of time.

"I see I see."

I was satisfied, and gave a nod. Master also told me about the time he was getting lost in the forest during an evacuation, and he had to hunt for a bear to quell his hunger.

"Well, I'm sure that you won't meet such a fate on the first floor. But, if you keep going down further, you never know what will happen. Make it a habit to take some water and food with you at all times, alright?"

The inn proprietress said so, as she handed me a leather pet bottle filled with water, and a small bag filled with some dumplings. Are those possibly ration meatballs? That's a karate ninja for you!

"That's two silver coins then, please."

What a dirty selling trick! With this flow, I can't decline now, so I just gave in and paid her.

"Thanks for your business. And, some free advice on top of it, you seem to have an ill fortune concerning women."

So after forcing me to buy something, you're giving me a bad fortune? I let out a sigh as I put the water and food in my pouch, and headed towards the exit.

"Come home early, alright."

Not using the words "Take care out there" was probably another way for adventurers to wish for your luck I assumed. I raised up my right hand to respond to the inn proprietress, and left the Eternal Maiden. And, passing past the guards that were shaking because of this cold morning, I once again descended down into the labyrinth. Just as the inn proprietress said, most of the adventurers were still asleep, no signs of them in these long passageways.

First, I moved along the pavement for a while, then I went left at the intersection I went right yesterday, and immediately was greeted by five kobolds.

"Yeah, let's come here at this hour every day.

With that, my route wouldn't overlap with another group's territory.

Deciding on that, I started to slash away at the kobolds. Unable to even let out a scream, they all scattered in small particles of light, leaving behind three tiny magic stones.

"Guess I'll have to aim for larger monsters?"

Since I didn't converse magic stones into money yet, I wasn't sure of the rates, but I guessed that earning 100.000 gold coins with this would prove hard, if not even impossible. The deeper one went down inside the

labyrinth, the stronger ones adversaries would become, with better loot in balance, so maybe I should go aim for a lower floor quickly.

"Seems like I have to search for the stairs that lead downstairs."

But, during my travels from my birthplace until the imperial capital, I heard stories of a so-called guardian that one had to defeat to go down one floor. Well, if I wanted to ask them for some details, they all ran away like they had seen the devil in person, but I should probably find out myself.

"Seeing and hearing really is a huge difference."

The only things I knew about being an adventurer is from the adventuring novels that gramps brought back with him from his travels, so my knowledge is severely lacking. Even Master said "Reality is formed with our own eyes", and never told me anything.

...Maybe I happened to make some grand mistake here? Well, no use in dwelling on it now. I should be moving. In my birthplace, there's a saying that goes "First act, then think"...As a result of that, Gramps did it with some younger girl and made some kids, which resulted in him getting tortured to death and revived around 108 times, so thinking before acting might be a valuable tactic as well.

"Cheating really isn't good."

Learning something from the negative example that was gramps, I went to slash down two nords I freshly spotted. Two small magic stones the size of a wheat grain. And, when I was looking for my next prey, I heard an ominous sound coming from the depth of the passageway.

"What is this?!"

But, the sound stopped immediately. Instead, I heard the sound of a tsunami of footsteps, followed by the angered screams of girls.

"What is this about, you idiot princess!"

"The idiot part is a bit vexing. Walking around to search for them feels like a bother, so I wanted to try something and tried this forbidden magic."

"What part of forbidden did you not understand?!"

I couldn't pick up everything, but that sounds just now was probably the result of this magic to gather the monsters around them...Why didn't I think of that! Is she a genius?! Well, there's the demerit of not being able to land a surprise attack, but it would save a lot of time, and other resources that you would waste by walking around, like food and water, so that's a big merit. And, the other adventurers won't be able to obstruct your route either. To come up with such a plan, this girl must be very talented.

My interest was heightened, and I made my way towards the source of their voices. Turning corners several times, I arrived at a certain passageway, gazing at the sheer number of goblins that had gathered here.

"That's gotta be at least 50. Amazing."

Just how many magic stones would you get by striking down all of those. I was certain, the person that thought of it must be a genius. And while I was showing admiration, I heard new fighting sounds, and the storm of footsteps from the goblins.

"O flame, roam free, and burn it all down, 'Fireball'!"

"Gege!"

Chants, followed by an explosion, and the groan of a goblin being hit by something that sounded very blunt. I'm guessing that they're one sorcerer, and one warrior, but the goblins are blocking my view...

As I was trying to get closer, the movement of the goblins came to a sudden halt.

"Or are you saying that a female elf like me should just end up violated by these goblins like in some erotic novel?!"

"So noisy!"

They're suddenly fighting between each other...? But look at that! They stopped the attacks of the goblins with just their words! They have to be really strong! I really want to talk to them. That's why, although I feel bad for having bad manners, I'll go ahead and clear up the inconveniences that are filling this passageway. With the goblins still having their backs turned towards me, I calmly lifted my greatsword and gathered aura in the blade. Only problem was that I had to be careful about wrapping up the girls in it, but...

"Blergh!"

As if she had read my thoughts, I heard the sound of one girl doing a dive unto the ground. That's a genius for you, I didn't have to worry about them to begin with. Once again giving my admiration, I let the aura flow out from the tip of my blade, and let it out in a straight horizontal line.

Black Shadow Style, Sword Magic - Rice Mowing

Like one would cut the head of rice crops, the black aura blade mowed down the monsters. As they were cut in half, they looked around towards me with a facial expression distorted by confusion and shock, as they dissolved into particles of light that scattered everywhere. The inside of the labyrinth shortly turned as bright as the outside during the early afternoon, so I narrowed my eyes. After the light disappeared, I made my way towards the two girls lying on the ground in the back.

"Pretty young."

The two of them seemed to be around 17. Seeing that the girl that attacked me was about 20, or even younger, the average age of adventurers might be lower than I thought.

One had long ears, presumably of the elvish race, a small robe over her stature, and a wooden cane in her hand. So she must be the sorcerer that used the magic to gather all those monsters here. Skin as white as ivory, her hair looked like golden thread, radiating even in this darkness, jade green, big eyes, and a beautiful face, as if it was created by hand to fit every human's taste. In short, she looked like the princess in those fairy-tales you read about.

The other girl had a smaller stature, seeming to be of the dwarven race, a full-body metal armor covering her, and a big shield in one hand, with a mace in the other, showing that she had great physical strength despite her

body. Brown skin like solid earth, red hair like a burning blaze, deep blue eyes like you were staring at the depths of the sea, and although she might have been the exact opposite of the elf girl, she was also cute in her own way.

...But for some reason, she had a huge moustache below her nose.

Anyway, observing them like that, I stood in front of them.

"....."

"———!"

The elf girl just looked up at me in silence, while the dwarf girl seemed keen on protecting her from something as she readied her shield, standing in front of her.

...Seems like I angered them. Well, it makes sense since I clearly violated the rules here. I really wish I could ask them about that beautiful plan they came up with, but looking at their current attitude, that would probably prove impossible. I lowered my head to give my apology, and was about to turn around and walk away. But, before that, there was something I desperately needed to tell the elf girl.

"I can see them."

Lying on the ground, her skirt got flipped up, and I could see her pure white panties. Since natural elves raised in the woods would normally promote their fully-naked principle with "Clothes and underwear is an impurity created by human civilization! That makes them look at us with perverted eyes even more!", so she must be raised in the city.

In response, gramps would get angry and argue that "Being naked without any embarrassment is like having grilled meat without any meat!"—Well, not like that matters right now.

Although I couldn't exactly do anything against it, I still happened to see the girl's underwear. There's no way I could just walk away without apologizing...Maybe I could have just ignored it, and not mentioned it to her in the first place though...

"" ..... ""

An awkward silence filled our midst, as we just continued to look at each other.

"...What's happening here."

Hearing the dwarf girl's fed-up sounding complaint, I was brought back to my senses. Since I pointed it out already, I can't change that, so let's just apologize.

"Apologies."

"S-Same here, excuse me..."

After seeing me lower my head once again, the elf girl got flustered a bit as she started blushing ever so slightly, and fixed her skirt. Alright, my apologies are done, so now it's time to leave this place as quickly as possible.

...Thinking about it, I don't really have the confidence to talk to a girl from the city like this. That's why I reluctantly turned back to them, when—

“Please wait a moment!”

I heard the elf girl’s dignified voice, stopping me in my tracks.

“.....”

Hesitating for a bit, I turned around in silence. Maybe just apologizing is not enough? But, what greeted me when I turned around was the elf girl, both her hands on her chest, moist eyes as she confessed the following.

“Dark Knight-sama, please become our comrade!”

“.....What?”





Faced with a phrase I never expected to hear, I let out a voice of surprise. Is this...her trying to flirt with me?! Is she trying to pick me up?! I mean, gramps told me that the women in the big cities are pretty assertive, but I didn't expect that to be true. No, rather than that, her way of addressing me...Dark Knight. The adventurers that were present in the inn were also whispering that name as they were talking about me...That sound so friggin cool!

Paladin and so on don't sound too bad either, giving you this hero-feeling, but Dark Knight is just...like an anti-hero, sounding even more impressive. Being betrayed by your previous comrades, left in complete darkness, still protecting the ones that are important to you, this feeling of solitude and grief that the normal hero doesn't have! Not to mention that there are crafty methods you can use to punish the evil, completely out of reach for the hero. Once peace has returned when the evil was defeated, say "There's still the greatest evil left, which is me", and walk off into the wilderness... So. Cool!

"Uhm, Dark Knight-sama?"

Oh, I was too busy with my fantasies that I kept quiet this whole time, and now the elf girl is looking all worried at me. Better calm down a bit. What should I do about this? Suddenly joining them like that is a bit off, but I like her way of addressing me a bit too much to decline right from the get-go.

"Let us talk this out above ground."

I responded in a deep voice, befitting the name of a Dark Knight, and started walking towards the exit, when I realized something.

"Is something the matter?"

The elf girl was still looking up at me with a worried expression. I mean, I actually have something to do, but now that I was playing the Dark Knight in front of you, I can't exactly say that...Though it wasn't visible beneath my mask, my face was filled with anguish, and the person that saved me from this situation was the dwarf girl, pointing at the objects lying on the ground where the goblins had stood a few minutes ago.

"I'm sorry, but can we pick up the magic stones of the goblins first?"

"Yeah!"

I quickly nodded in panic, as I started picking up the magic stones.

Thanks for the save, false moustache dwarf! And, curse my poor person's mentality for not pulling through the hard-boiled play!

\*

Having finished the collection, we stood before the problem of how to split them up—

"Since you were the one that saved us, it is your right to keep the magic stones, Dark Knight-sama," the elf girl told me, and while I felt a bit uncomfortable about it, I put the great number of magic stones in my pouch.

Not only clever, but she's not greedy nor offended either, a really wonderful girl. As I was deeply admiring her, we started making our way to the exit of the labyrinth.

"Excuse my late introduction, but my name is Rufa, and this here is my friend Garnet."

"Rufa-san and Garnet-san I see."

As I repeated their names to burn them into my memory, the elf girl Rufa corrected me.

"You don't have to add the -san."

"Same here, I don't mind if you leave it out."

The dwarf girl Garnet agreed with Rufa. Though I feel slightly flustered to call them directly by name, that wouldn't be very Dark Knight-like, so I kept quiet and nodded.

"And, is it fine for me to ask after Dark Knight-sama's name?"

".....Alba."

Delaying my response with slight hesitation, I gave her my name. My childhood friend at my birthplace would always make fun of me by calling me "Albatross Alba", so I had a slight complex about my name, you could say.

"Alba-sama is it, what a gallant and wonderful name."

...A goddess actually appeared, and she is walking right next to me.

As I was deeply appreciating her comment, Garnet stood on her toes, as she nudged at my shoulder.

"Let me be so kind to tell you, but don't be deceived by her cute fa—"

**Bang!**

"Ara, I'm sorry. My hand must have slipped."

Garnet was about to tell me something as Rufa's cane suddenly crashed into her shin. Maybe it was just my imagination that she did a full swing in reality.

"~~~?! What are you doing, you super idiot!"

"You too, how about you don't say anything unnecessary."

As Garnet was crouching down to hold her leg, Rufa whispered something in her ear. Looking at them like this, they felt like sisters with a slight age difference. They really are good friends. And while we finished our self-introductions, we arrived at the stairs that lead out of the labyrinth.

Exactly at that time, another group of adventurers came down the stairs, and as they spotted us they let out a voice of shock, with a surprised expression.

"The rumoured Dark Knight?! Why is he together with the princess?!"

So my Dark Knight nickname is already spreading? That's a bit flustering. And also, princess? Slightly confused, I gazed over at Rufa, who returned my gaze with a full-faced smile.

"I have the beauty of a princess, so they have been calling me like that ever since a long time ago."

"Who's a beauty."

Garnet repaid Rufa for that slap with the cane from before, and gave a clean backhand into the solar plexus of her. But, it's true that Rufa is a beautiful girl, so the princess nickname isn't too far fetched in my opinion. As long as she's not one of those 'PaCra Princesses' Gramps told me about, who has a relationship with every male in the party, crashing the unity...

As I was lost in thought, Garnet once again tapped me on the shoulder.

"What you're thinking right now might not be too far from reality."

Wha—Did she read my thoughts?! My childhood friend also told me that

"Your thoughts are leaking on your face", but I should be wearing my helmet right now...Is she some esper?!

"Well, I was also deceived in the beginning, but if you put down this sinister-looking amor, and show some normal attitude toward her, she'll—"

"Alba-sama, let's keep the talking at that, and hurry on out."

Recovering from the retort to her solar plexus, Rufa once again cut Garnet's sentence, as she suddenly grabbed my arm to keep walking. When doing so, she beautifully stepped on Garnet's foot...Are they actually that close? I'm getting a bit worried here.

But anyway, we passed past the adventurers, frozen up out of confusion, and got out from the labyrinth, on our way to the inn ward, where the two of them guided me to a two-floor apartment.

"Please, come in."

Inside the room that we stepped in, presumably Rufa's, was filled with decorative plants, turning the whole room green.

"They are an elf's blood after all. Being born in the city, I had only been to a forest a few times, but I still can't calm down without some plants around me."

Rufa felt a bit flustered as she gave a bitter smile, but I don't mind at all. On the contrary, it makes me feel like my birthplace, so it's more soothing than anything. But, this being my first time in a girl's room like this, it makes me feel nervous more than my first real battle with those monsters back then. My childhood friend's house was so small that I couldn't even enter it, and Grandma might have looked young and beautiful in her own way, but her insides felt less like a girl's and more like a living fossil—Let's leave it at that. If I think any more into it, her lighting (magic) might come down on me.

As I shook my head to rid myself of these unnecessary thoughts, Rufa had a dubious gaze as she offered me a seat. I gave her my thanks and sat down, and now I was sitting across the two girls at a table.

"And, will you become our comrade?"

"....."

I returned silence to Rufa's question. It's because I was really lost on how to respond to that. For now, I can see that they're not pulling some plug to rob me of all my money or my equipment. They seem to be seriously looking for some comrades.

*But, comrades, huh...*

Gaining comrades would mean that cruising through the labyrinth would be safer, and you can take on even stronger monsters. However, you would be forced to split your earnings, and in the worst case, you would earn less than before. Thinking about the fastest way to build my own home, it might actually be faster to go alone. Also, I can't help but feel nervous, talking to people from the city like this! I mean, I can't exactly initiate a conversation with "Gotta pull the harvest for the apricots since it's going to be hot this year" right? Especially if it's two girls like them! I'm not fluent in which clothes and sweets are in now, or which diva is making the big business at the moment?!

Rufa might have taken my silence induced by my interior conflict as rejection, as her expression darkened.

"You must be worried about teaming up with us, who don't even belong to a clan..."

When she says clan, is she referring to those gatherings of adventurers?

But, before I could think too deeply about it, Garnet might have guessed that I only possessed vague knowledge, as she gave a short explanation.

"I don't know what they call it at your place, but there are these 'Parties', groups of comrades that enter the labyrinth together, and once there's a gathering of those parties, you call them a 'Clan'."

"Last year, there were around 1200 adventurers, and I heard that around 50 clans were known."

Hearing Rufa's addition, I was unable to hide my surprise. So there's even more adventurers here than in my whole hometown? That's what you'd expect from the biggest city on the continent.

"Once you belong to a clan, you will receive help if you're decimated in the labyrinth. However, we have received a prohibition of entering a clan."

"That is all my shitty old man's—Excuse me, an undesirable state caused by my lack of virtue."

...For a second, did I just feel a black surge coming from Rufa, or was that just my imagination? Still, for two excellent girls to be declined from the clans around, is it that tough to get in one?

Once again Garnet took my silence as a sign to offer an explanation.

"It depends on the clan. Talking about the strongest clan White Wing out there, who have it as their goal to 'Arrive at the deepest floor of the labyrinth', you need to be strong enough to make it to the fifth floor at least, or they'll send you home at their doorstep."

"But those are in the minority, and most of them just come into existence by a natural gathering of people."

Rufa said so with a smile, but I couldn't help but shudder. That's way too tough of a condition for a loner country boy like me. "Alright, let's gather people and build a clan", what's with that, some new type of torture?

"After that, jobs get split up, and the membership fee makes up for the price of a resurrection and so on, and when there's even people responsible to take back decimated teammates, everyone can profit from being in a clan."

I felt relieved after hearing Garnet's addition. This feels almost like something business-like. But, since the membership fee seems to be pretty expensive, so someone who's trying to save as much as he can, it's not for me.

"There's a great variety of clans out there, but just as I said before, but we have some circumstances, so nobody will take us in."

Seeing a young girl like Garnet let out a deep sigh, I could feel my chest burn up with rage. What horrible bullying, I can't allow that! As the Dark Knight of justice, I cannot overlook something like this!

"No no hold on! It's not because of the reason you're imagining!"

Garnet quickly calmed me down as I suddenly got up.

"Ignoring the cause, fault lies with us. The ones from the clans have done nothing wrong."

Seeing that even Rufa said so, I urged myself to calm down. Although I didn't feel completely satisfied, I sat down once again.

"To repeat it, but we do not belong to a clan as of right now. Our skill is also on the meager side, so if you could help us out..."

Rufa became vague, as her face turned into the color of a ripe tomato, and she opened up one button of her upper clothing. It's not even that hot, so why would she...? Does she actually belong to those nude activist elves after all? Well, I guess she can't help it then. She was raised in a human city, so going naked in her own room isn't anything that I could hold against her. Still, I feel bad, seeing that just talking to me built up this much stress.

"You're still seeming to have a misunderstanding."

Garnet looked at me with a gaze filled with worry, but do not fret! I won't discriminate against your friend just because she's feeling the need to go naked here! Also, back at my birthplace, about half of my comrades were a naked tribe, so I'm used to it! That's why, don't sweat it—maybe my encouragement was transmitted, because Rufa suddenly raised up her head to look at me.

"Alba-sama, let me ask you again. Please become our comrade!"

Her emerald-like eyes were slowly building up tears, and just seeing how desperate she was made my heart ache in pain.

...Really, I'm so pathetic, worrying about the most worthless things, and letting her suffer like that. What worth is there, throwing away a girl like her seeking for help, my eyes only turned towards my dream of building my own home. I became an adventurer to see how far I could make it on my own.

"Alright."

Fit as a Dark Knight they would be able to rely on, I gave my approval in a deep voice.

"I'll fight alongside you."

"Really?! Thank you so much, Alba-sama!"

Rufa pushed her body forward in deep emotion, and tightly grasped both of my hands. Seeing her this delighted, I felt like agreeing here was the right

choice. Still, I wish that she wouldn't just invite any misunderstandings with such an action. Since I'm wearing my jet-black gauntlets, I can't feel her skin directly, but normally you'd definitely get the wrong idea here.

Grandma even said "They will listen to whatever it may be as long as they receive a beauty's smile in return. That's just how the living beings called men work," or something like that. Meeting her halfway, Gramps also commented that "Being deceived by a beauty although knowing about her lies is the ability of us men."

...Hold on, so am I being deceived here?

"By the way, there is one thing I would really like to ask in the end."

As I was left in the depths of my own confusion, Rufa let go of my hands, and inquired with a serious face.

"What exactly is your goal to step down into the labyrinth, Alba-sama?"

Oh right, I didn't tell them yet. My goal is—

"Become my own lord as an independent person."

The moment I responded with that, Rufa's smile froze up.

Eh, is it that unfashionable? I know that it's a bit old-fashioned and so on, and I heard that those that aren't bound by house and job are much more popular with the women nowadays...But, I heard grumbles and complaints from Grandma about Gramps living that very life...

In the meantime however, maybe thinking that I was worried, Rufa's smile returned.

"That's Abel-sama, your aspirations are worthy of making you the Dark Knight."

Oh my, I'll start blushing if you praise me like that. And, Rufa wasn't done yet.

"So that we can both fulfill our goals, let's work hard from tomorrow onwards."

"Yeah."

I gave a strong affirmative nod, and stood up, signaling that our conversation was over. Though I forgot about asking the girls about their goal, that wasn't all that important right now.

From now onward, we've become important comrades, who will protect each other in the deep dark down deep dark...and it might be better to leave early, so that Rufa can finally strip down to relieve herself!

\*

Alba left the room, and after waiting a quick ten minutes, Rufa killed her insincere smile, and let out a sigh.

"Fuuu, doing it after such a long time, I can't help but get stiff shoulders."

"That was pretty disgusting."

Remembering the good-girl acting just now sent shivers down Garnet's spine as she let out a snort. Rufa however didn't pay any attention to that, and just laid down on the bed.

"Still, to become his own lord...I didn't expect him to be such an ambitious person to try and usurp the imperial throne and get the Goldot Empire in his hands."

This city that prospers thanks to the adventurers filling it, he appeared as the long-term enemy of the adventurers, looking like the Dark Knight.

Hence, his appearance might as well be regarded as a declaration of war against the Empire. Thinking like that, Rufa had a more cheerful smile, while Garnet couldn't help but feel uneasy.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your moment of rapture, but I don't think that he has such aspirations."

"Huh? That puny false moustache of yours is joke enough."

"Shut it!"

Rufa just shrugged at Garnet, boiling in anger.

"A man showing this much strength, and wrapping his body in such equipment, said that he wants to be his own lord. What else is there that he could have meant than trying to overtake this country?"

"How about just trying to make his own house somewhere in this city."

"If he wanted a house that badly, he might as well just sell that equipment of his and buy a mansion somewhere in a higher ward though?"

"Well, that's a thing, but..."

Garnet didn't have anything to say back to that, and muffled in her false moustache. Rufa's argument is very much correct. Out of 100 people, 100 people would surely support her opinion. However, one shall never forget. That the unrealistic things might happen from time to time, even though the 'Obvious' is right there.

"What if he is unaware of the value that his equipment holds, being nothing more than a naive young man, trying to earn his bread?"

"Garnet, look at reality, not your fantasies."

Rufa went to warn her friend with a fed-up expression.

*Should I just beat it into her*—Garnet thought, as her fist started shaking, but if she snapped with something like that, she would not have ended up a childhood friend of this idiot princess.

"Seeing that I am the 7th princess, Rufa Auram Goldot, he chose bold words as 'Become my own lord'. What other meaning could they hold besides trying to overturn the country."

Rufa quickly tried a diversion back when they happened to run into those adventurers, but she couldn't believe that Alba would be deceived with just that. There is talk all over the city that the current emperor has a beautiful elf daughter to him, and the official pictures of her in formal clothing are selling very well in the city. So much that it would be difficult not to get wind of that.

"Being a princess of this country, not a single clan would take us in, but he accepted us just like that. It was probably all to one day rule over this Empire."

"Well, that's what it might boil down to."

Garnet thought as she had a sour look. With a noble family that has a gallant and fearful lion as its coat of arms, if you presented them with a mat made out of a dead lion's skin, they would surely take it as a declaration of war. That's just how the noble society works.

Seeing that the princess of a country decides to become an adventurer on her own accord, after being raised in the noble society, Alba's actions could only be seen as a defiance against the Empire.

*Still, I'm pretty certain that he was not aware of that...*

He did not know of Rufa's identity, and just decided to offer a helping hand out of goodwill. And the girl in question was confident that a coincidence like that could not exist. After all, in the noble society that she grew up, things like good deeds do not exist. That's why she was gravely mistaken in the Dark Knight's aspirations.

"How troublesome..."

"Yes, he is a troublesome partner. However, we had no other choice but to make him our partner."

Rufa even took Garnet's sigh the wrong way, and announced.

"We have to arrive at the deepest floor of the labyrinth, and save this country."

"Yeah."

Even Garnet gave an affirmative nod to that. And, Rufa followed up with a carefree smile—

"And, we'll make my idiot sisters be beaten into silence!"

Spilling her evil true intentions.

"Not going to happen."

Now Garnet had to shake her head in denial, but that didn't stop Rufa from her cursing.

"I'll definitely pay you back hundredfold for oppressing me just because I'm an elf, you idiot sisters...!"

Although the Goldot Empire is an open country that accepts a variety of races like dwarves and orcs, it is still a human country. With a wage of around 7:3 for humans, ever since the start of the foundation of the country, the imperial family had consisted of 99% humans. Now, the 41st emperor of the Empire, Juraflu, had welcomed an elf as his concubine, and between the two, the 7th princess Rufa was born. Being an elf naturally turns into a big ruckus. In the case of reproduction between members of differing races, the race of the born would take on either of their parent's races. Except for the extremely rare case, a so-called hybrid, holding both special characteristics, is never born. In any case, they hold the outward appearance of one parent. The statistics show that the chances of the child becoming either race are 50-50, and there is no gap between boy or girl. Hence, an elf girl being born between the emperor and his elf concubine was nothing more than a coincidence. However, that very fact enraged the nobles, who saw humans on the top of the race pyramid.



—Do you mean to say that, rather than our blood, who has served under your Majesty for a history of a thousand years, the blood of an elf is superior?!

It is a worthless fault they tried to find, but, unlike the adventurers that worked their way up through their own talent, that was something the nobles, who had nothing that made them special or worthy to stand where they were now, could never allow themselves to accept. Now, the other daughters of the emperor, being born out of his legal wife or other concubines held great evil will towards her, and, disregarding the fact that she was their blood related little sister, they did not hold back on openly showing their disgust with her.

“They didn’t hesitate to tell me ‘My, you’re actually wearing clothes today’ or ‘But, you’re not wearing any panties, right? What an indecent girl you are’ or ‘How about you go naked together with Onee-chan? Hue hue’ and so on, making fun of me just because I am an elf!”

“Let me be honest, but that last one is pretty dangerous in my eyes.”

As Garnet’s expression grew pale, she could still understand the feelings of her older sisters. Rufa’s outer appearance was without a doubt the one of beauty to behold, and she was able to hold her role as a princess in public spaces. Since only Garnet and a handful of trusted friends and people knew of her vulgar and idiotic personality, the only thing that the sisters could fault her with was the fact that she was an elf.

As a matter of fact, when the emperor decided to sell portraits of his seven daughters, Rufa’s sales were greatly outdoing the ones of the other six. Though one of the main reasons for that might have just been that the townspeople rarely get to see any elves, seeing that they housed in the deep parts of the forests, and now they had Rufa to make up for that, but whatever it was, the fact that the elder sisters received a crushing defeat by the hand of their little sister didn’t change.

After that incident, the relationship between the sisters worsened even more, and although her father was the main reason for that, he showed more antipathy than ever.

“As the hero that saved the Empire, having grasped enough political power, I’ll have the royal family and nobles parade through the city, completely naked and the ‘Nude Day’ will be born!”

“Wouldn’t that mean that you had to go through that as well?”

Well, she’d definitely receive support from all the perverted gentlemen and ladies out there.

“Also, why would you save the Empire if there are the older sisters that you hate so much?”

“Again, keep the only joke here that false moustache of yours. If I cared about that, all those innocent townspeople would suffer.”

“I really like that part about you.”

“...I’m sorry, I like men, so can we stay as good friends?”

“I really hate that part about you.”

Garnet brought a chop down on the head of Rufa, who got pale as she frantically tried to hide her chest.

"Leaving aside your revenge against your older sisters, I agree that we have to save the country. To achieve that, we need Alba's strength."

Though she felt bad for using the pure boy inside the devilish armor, it's an important part of their plan to save hundreds of thousands of people.

"But, couldn't you have at least told him the reason?"

"....."

Rufa got lost in thought as Garnet brought up that suggestion. And shortly after, she calmly shook her head.

"Impossible. I cannot think that he would just believe me that the Empire is heading towards ruin."

They had several hints to base that on, but no solid proof. Knowing that the Goldot Empire had been basking in glory and money, who could believe that it would be walking towards its own death? As of right now, there was nobody besides Garnet herself, and Rufa of course.

"All that will lead to is being laughed at. Also, he'd certainly lose motivation, knowing that his wish would not be granted."

Once you arrive at the deepest part of the labyrinth, the 7th floor, you will get one wish granted, no matter what.

That very lie mostly is the reason that so many adventurers came storming here to grant their wishes, and in order to have these adventurers go even deeper into the labyrinth and bring back magic stones of even higher quality, the Empire spread that false information. If Rufa's strictly hidden information proves to be the truth, then there is no ray of hope waiting for the adventurers at the bottom of the labyrinth, but rather overwhelming despair that swallows up everything.

"Not to mention, nobody holds bottomless kindness that we can just tell him to fight for the country. If it's Alba-sama, who plans to plunder the Empire, he will just seize a chance and go for his own profit."

"....."

*I really think that it's bottomless kindness that brought him to accept but—* Those words certainly wouldn't arrive at Rufa's ears, so Garnet kept her mouth shut.

"Still, we should improve our plan for tomorrow."

"With plan, do you mean to use 'Alarm' again to gather the monsters?"

"Not just that, I also have to think of a date plan so that Alba-sama falls for me!"

".....Huh?"

Since the idiot princess blurted something incomprehensible again, Garnet could only stare at her with a confused expression, but Rufa didn't mind that and just got up from the bed with a serious face.

"Listen. Even if I have the noble goal of saving the Empire from ruin, what we have to do is parasitic activities."

Parasitism—not something that works based on equal favors, but one where the weaker feeds off the strong. Using their body to entice the opposite sex (or in rare cases even the same sex), you can force cracks and rifts into the bonds of a party, acting as as ‘PaCra Princess’ or ‘The price of the funeral service’, gaining great disdain from other adventurers.

In the past, she acted as a beautiful siren that broke down even clan-level bonds, and this is another important reason why clans would not take her in, besides her high standing.

“It’s truly a shabby action comparable to that of a lowly parasite, but there’s nothing we can do right now.”

Being detested by the greater number of adventurers has but one value.

That is to grow stronger in the shortest amount of time.

“Garnet, do you know how many years it can take a new adventurer until he makes it down to the 6th floor?”

“There are barely any people that make it down to the 6th floor to begin with, but...around five years?”

“Tch, correct.”

“Just honestly praise me.”

Garnet retorted Rufa’s annoyed comment.

“Five years, huh. That’s way too late.”

“That is just the general measurement, and there are people like godspeed Chidori that made it one and a half years.”

“That still is too late...”

Garnet let out a sigh to compensate with the despair that was slowly approaching her. The only year the girls had left was but just one.

“Do you understand it now? To arrive at the lowest floor of the labyrinth in this one year, we have to grow as much as we can, even if it’s by feeding off others.”

The strength of an adventurer is determined by their specks on physical power, dexterity, and agility. All those perimeters are decided by how high their aura was. With just physical training, there are physical limits that one will arrive sooner or later, but there is no maximum amount of aura one can have. Obviously, the strength from the aura greatly overweighs the strength from one’s own body.

As an example, being born an elf, Rufa possesses a high-level aura, and although she has a slender build as a girl, she can bring out about the same strength as a muscular soldier. Also, since the castle is filled with graceful and ladylike princesses, the only times she would have gotten serious was against the shrimp, holding immense strength, the dwarf girl—Garnet. But anyway, there is no greater way to grow as an adventurer but to raise your aura. Naturally, the only way to strengthen one’s aura is to defeat monsters again and again.

“Commonly, it says ‘If you want to move down to the second floor, you have to hunt for 300 goblins’, but that would take you months by doing that normally.”

Just thinking about it made Rufa feel tired as she let out a deep sigh. Being nothing but lumps of magical power, monsters scatter into their previous form, and are being sucked up by nearby adventurers. The body that has to deal with this overflowing energy enlarges the vessel to prevent self-destruction. That is called the mechanism that brings forth the growth of the aura.

Leaving aside the detailed procedure, all one has to know is that one gets stronger by defeating monsters. And, the more monsters, and the stronger they are, one defeats, the quicker is the growth of the aura.

"If you got a 6th rank comrade that could help you in hunting a dragon on the 6th floor, that would probably be done in a moment."

Gritting her teeth at the absurdity of the world, Rufa once again let out a sigh. What's important during that process is not to deliver the final blow, but to be close to the high concentration of magical power so that the body absorbs it naturally.

As a matter of fact, thanks to Alba defeating those about 50 goblins with but one attack, the magical power that got freed from the dead monsters definitely made Rufa and Garnet stronger than they were yesterday. And, rather than going to defeat 300 goblins on the first floor, higher efficiency can be achieved by going to defeat but one dragon on the 6th floor.

To be frank, rather than working hard on the first floor for months, the effects are much greater by just leeching off a strong adventurer, and fighting but half a day down on the 6th floor. That is the very reason why those leechers never disappear, even though they get despised by every adventurer.

"I can't believe that you will not gain true strength if you don't spill your own sweat and blood..."

"That thinking is just pure romanticism. What we desperately need is the strength to make it to the deepest floor."

Garnet pulled a wry face, while Rufa returned a cold assessment. However, neither of them were in the wrong. What leeching off other adventurers brings you is nothing but stronger aura, while your sword skills and defensive body movement, as well as your knowledge to fight the different monsters, the team-play with your comrades, and the courage to fight to the death, can still be on the level of a new adventurer. In the end, the ones that will stand at the top with true strength are the ones that have made it through the thorny path.

However, by giving up on this summit, the fastest way to get stronger is still the way of leeching off others. And, for Rufa and Garnet, who have a time limit pressuring them all the time, they could not choose any other path besides that.

"In the end, we were denied entry to the stronger clans like White Wing, and our last effective hand left was this forbidden magic."

"Don't pull me into your despair!"

"But thanks to that, Alba-sama appeared in front of us."

"Mmm..."

Garnet's voice of anger disappeared quickly after she saw the seriousness in Rufa's eyes. Her deep-green emerald eyes were filled with overflowing gratitude.

"Though I don't believe in god, even I found myself praying to the heavens above."

"You..."

"Thank you, for giving me the best target to leech off."

"You really are nothing but a shitty princess."

Garnet once again struck down on Rufa's head with a chop, after she had seen that angelic smile paired up with the most disgusting words. If she hadn't known that half of this was to hide her embarrassment, Garnet would have cut contact with her a long time ago.

*Although it's still not fitting right with me that half of it is her real intention...*

As Garnet held her head in her hands, she still wouldn't blame Rufa any further. Although she might think about the shittiest of things, she's doing it with a purpose that would benefit other people.

"Anyway, we have no other option but to leech off Alba-sama."

"Very well."

"And to guarantee that success, we have to take safety measures."

"You're right."

"That's why I'll go on a date with Alba-sama, and make him fall for me!"

"That I do not get."

Since there was a huge jump on her logic, Garnet gave a fed-up retort.

"If you really need some safety measures that he won't cut off from your leeching, and is even more ready for it, wouldn't it be fine to just offer your body immediately?"

As Garnet stated the obvious, Rufa shouted her response with a bright red face.

"What kind of demon are you, telling me to do a naked strolling play with him?!"

"Nobody said anything like that! I'm just talking about having sex with him normally!"

"No, uhm...I want my first time to be with someone I love...in a romantic mood beneath the starry sky..."

"So it still is outdoors, huh?"

She might have been raised in the big city, but she still has the naked soul of an elf. Looking at the sight of the wussy Rufa, who only possessed superficial knowledge about sex, Garnet felt tired already, but at least she's not willing to give her body away that easily.

*And I'm sure that that guy would have declined her anyway.*

After accidentally seeing Rufa's underwear by accident, he was man enough to point that out, and still apologize. Not to mention that he got angry on

their behalf as he had gotten the wrong idea about their circumstances at first.

"Anyway, I don't plan on selling my chastity for the sake of the Empire. That's why, I'll make him my plaything, while keeping it in a platonic relationship!"

"I still hate you for that."

Playing with him to her heart's content, not willing to cross that final line is just dragging it out tortuously.

*If it wasn't for that kindness of his, things might actually end bad for her, I assume...*

Being naive in her calculations like this is what still qualified her as a sheltered princess. Hence, Garnet is still unable to leave her side out of worry.

"What are these doubtful eyes about? You're suspecting that I won't be able to make Abel-sama fall for me, is that it?"

"You got some really bad eyes there."

As Garnet was snorting to herself, seeing that the elf in front of her sure doesn't realize what the people around her think, Rufa let out an overly confident laugh.

"Fufufu, I didn't just think of this plan without any basis or anything.

Frankly, Alba-sama is interested in me!"

"Well, it's true if you think about it. At least in your brain."

"It's not just my imagination!"

Rufa complained quickly after being looked at like a pitiful girl by Garnet.

"I do have proof."

"For example?"

"During our previous conversation, Alba-sama was entranced by the valley of my chest!"

Full confidence shining through, Rufa puffed out her chest, her upper button still open. After a short silence, Garnet tilted her head in confusion.

"Can there be a valley without mountains?"

"There is the possibility that Alba-sama prefers small breasts, you know?!"

"Don't you feel sad, saying that yourself?"

As a gaze of sympathy came down on her by Garnet, a waterfall started gushing forth from Rufa's eyes as she desperately tried to push up the cliff of her chest.

"Damn it, no matter how much I eat, I can't gain any weight there...Curse my elvish genes...!"

"Instead, that earned you a lot of envy from your older sisters."

She is beautiful, won't get fat, and because of her long life span, there are no signs of getting older yet, has a high aura from the day she is born, and has talent to become a top-grade sorcerer, those are the attributes she has come to know by being an elf. Honestly, how could she hold jealousy towards humans.

"Anyway, tomorrow I'll try my best to make Alba-sama my captive!"

“Well, do your best, I guess.”

Garnet had grown tired of retorting every single ridiculous statement that came out of Rufa’s mouth, and just went to wave at her and at her, about to leave the room. However, before she could escape, Rufa put her slender fingers on her shoulders.

“Garnet, no matter what happens, we’re friends, right?”

“What’s with you, so suddenly. Don’t ask the obvious.”

Garnet grew a bit flustered, seeing the girl’s gaze.

“Then, let us both work hard to seduce Alba-sama, okay?” Rufa said with a bright smile.

“You’re telling me to do it as well?!”

“Of course. Assuming that he is a healthy man, I will be able to handle it on my own I believe, but in the case that he turns out to be a lolicon, we might need the power of a legal little girl like you.”

“Who’s a little girl?!”

“Of course, with your little body, there’s not a single hillock—”

“Shut up!”

Garnet’s iron fist ran into Rufa’s solar plexus. And, their fight continued until the landlord came to break them up.

\*

“.....What?”

The next day after I became comrades with Rufa and Garnet, I thought that we’d dive into the labyrinth again quickly, and so I went to greet them with my full equipment, only to be met with confusion. After all, the equipment the two of them were wearing right now was completely different from the one they had yesterday.

“Alba-sama, good morning.”

The Rufa that was greeting me was wearing a beautiful dress, her shoulders and back widely exposed. Maybe she really belongs to the naked fraction. Anyway, Garnet on her part didn’t put on her metallic armor like yesterday, but rather a gothic lolita one-piece—

“Ugh, just kill me already...!”

Hiding her red face with both her hands, she looked like a female knight about to be violated by orcs. Well, I heard that orcs actually like muscular women more, they probably wouldn’t prefer her in this gothlohi appearance.

“What is this about?”

Since they were clearly not dressed for the occasion, I requested an explanation, which was given by Rufa with a bright smile.

“Alba-sama, you have barely seen the imperial capital, right? If so, how about we take a break today, and we will show you around the city.”

I see, that’s what it was about. Truth be told, I couldn’t get inside the actual city, which left me a bit disappointed, and the only places besides that which I have seen are the labyrinth and the inn itself. Being said that

adventurers can only come in and out of the 9th ward, it might be a good idea to look at a weapon and armor shop.

"Also, I thought that it might be a bit tough on your body, entering the labyrinth day in day out, but was just unnecessary meddling?"

"No."

I gently shook my head to transmit my thanks, seeing that Rufa started to look at me with a worrisome expression. Seeing that she was honestly worried and considerate like that, I could only feel gratitude. Maybe my feelings properly made it over to Rufa, because her face brightened up shortly after, as she grabbed my left arm.

"Then, let's go. Come on, Garnet, you as well."

"Do I really have to do it too?"

"...I can spread your secret across the Empire if you're more comfortable with that?"

"Ugh...you unorthodox princess!"

After Rufa went to whisper something into Garnet's ear, she started shaking fiercely, and grabbed my right hand, and now I was sandwiched between them.

I think they're just making sure that I don't get lost in this city I'm not used to...But I wonder, this feels like I'm doing something very bad. The adventurers that we were passing also gave us shocked reactions.

"So the rumour that the Dark Knight was befriending the princess was actually true?!"

"I know that adventurers have their freedom, but this is taking it a bit too far..."

"This last after an elf's ears even during grave danger, I totally understand!"

"He's making a young dwarf girl wear gothic lolita clothes, wonderful."

Hold on, I'm not some womanizer like gramps! I can't ignore the last two statements!

I looked over at the adventurers to try and solve the misunderstanding, but they all just ran away before I could say anything.

Again, just wait a second. You female priests over there, stop looking at me like my Grandma would look at Gramps when he was flirting with another girl!

"Alba-sama, is something the matter?"

"....."

I just shook my head in silence as Rufa looked up at me with a worrisome gaze. They are just honestly showing me around the city, so they'd maybe start feeling bad if my evaluation dropped because of them. It's fine. They can just think of me whatever they want. Who cares if they accuse me of being an elf ear fetishist or a lolicon!

...Sorry, I take that back, my heart is about to break in two.

As I cowered in depression, Garnet grasped my hand even tighter.

"I know that you're innocent, so don't let it get to you."



Is she an angel?! No, she's an archangel! Paired with her childish appearance, I felt like I could see something glowy expanding from her back.

"Are you thinking something rude right now?"

As I put my hands together like I was praying, Garnet looked at me with a very disgruntled expression. Then, I realized something. She had been hiding her own mouth all this time with her right hand. What's wrong? Are you embarrassed because you just lost a milk tooth in the front row?

"I already lost all of my milk teeth!"

Garnet might have realized what I was thinking as she hit my lower leg at full force. But, unlike my full-body armor, she was only wearing zero defense knee-socks, which made her cower down in pain instead.

"Ughu!"

Is she okay...Huh?

To hold her hurting leg, Garnet separated her right hand from her mouth, and getting a clear sight, I finally understood why she was hiding it before.

"You lost your false moustache."

Today, there was no sight of that overblown moustache decorating her face, and it was just her normal, cute face. Looking at it now, it matched with her small stature, and she had the appearance of a 10 years old girl. As I felt the sudden urge to pat her on the head and stretched out my hand, Garnet just pushed that away and glared at me.

"It's my real hair."

"No, that was clearly—"

"It's. My. Real. Hair."

...I think that if you could take off your hair like that and put it on again, you wouldn't be a dwarf, but a mutant. While I was retorting that inside my head, Rufa pulled on my left arm.

"Alba-sama, I'm sorry about this, but could you not touch that subject?"

".....?"

"She doesn't feel very comfortable if you point it out..."

Somehow I feel like I understand it, but at the same time, I don't. Anyway, if she says so, then it's probably better not to bring up that false moustache again.

"Let us go."

Taking Garnet's hand again as she once again started hiding her mouth in displeasure, I started walking. Rufa lined up next to me, as she explained the surroundings of the city to me.

"You might already be familiar with it, but the imperial capital is surrounded by nine rings of walls that have the form of rings, with the first ward right in the middle at the imperial castle, and the 9th ward the furthest outside."

Yeah, I know that much.

“And, this 9th ward is built like a clock, with twelve individual districts. The north gate is the 12th, the south gate the 6th, the west gate the 3th, and east gate the 9th.”

While she was explaining that to me, we passed the city gate, and arrived at the 6th district in the south. Unlike the 7th district, also called the inn district, filled with inns and houses for rent, it was just like the 8th district, holding only the entrance to the labyrinth, a vast open land with nothing inside.

“**Cough.** The gates that separate the interior of the city from the outside will be the very first target in the case that war breaks out. Prepared for such a situation, the gates in the east, west, south, and north are this vast land so that soldiers can gather here.”

Trying to calm herself down a bit with a cough, Garnet provided a detailed explanation.

I see, I thought I was deceived when I entered from the west gate, but that explains why.

“With this large territory in the Goldot Empire’s possession, once the capital is being surrounded to this level, things are already in a stalemate, so many call this just a waste of precious ground...”

“This has been a custom the Empire had been still small, surrounded by other countries after all. They probably can’t change it that quickly.”

Rufa and Garnet gave a bitter smile, but I felt admiration more than anything. Preparing for the one in a million chance is very clever after all, and I can feel the thousand-year old history of the Empire, directly from this wasteland.

“Right now, there’s still no need for that, but if the population continues to grow like this, we might need to make this another living district, and build a 10th wall.”

“By doing that, the labyrinth would end up inside the city though, which would be very dangerous.”

Garnet furrowed her brows. She might really be worried—

“Monsters might be gushing out of the labyrinth. At least, that’s what I think.” With an expression equally heavy to a stone, Rufa stated.

Is something like that even possible? I mean...

“In these thousand years—No, to be precise, in these past 999 years, an event like that has never happened. However, we have no proof whatsoever that it won’t happen in the 1000th year.”

That’s true. Nothing in this world stays unchanged forever. And Rufa seems fairly certain that the labyrinth is more dangerous than we might think.

Does she know anything?

As I was holding my doubts and faced over towards Rufa, she responded with a grin.

“This is something that the nobles should be thinking about, and not something for us normal adventurers to be thinking about.”

That’s true, but it feels like she is avoiding the topic...

“Look, Alba-sama, we can see the shopping street from here.”

Rufa pulled on my arm and pointed forward, dragging me out of my thoughts. Passing through the gate of the 8th district, which had nothing but wasteland, the 5th district, also known as the shopping district, had, just as the name suggested, countless shops and stores lined up.

“Amazing.”

I was surprised at the sheer liveliness back when I entered the inn district, but it sure doesn't compare to this shopping district. Small, narrow shops are lined up next to the other, adventurers wrapped in their armors, and even the soldiers from the Empire not to mention the traveling businessmen, all sorts of people were walking down the streets.

“It's being said that you can buy whatever you desire, from spoons to a greatsword.”

“I doubt that there's anything better than your armor here, but they even have magic tools, which could be useful,” added Garnet.

I see. There's nothing I really want to buy right now, but I'd at least want to take a stroll around. As I started walking ahead in excitement, Garnet pulled back my hand, and stopped me.

“Don't hurry, we will go to the bank of this Empire first,” she said, and pointed directly horizontally.

Looking over there, there was a huge building, standing out in a similar way like the castle in the middle of the capital would stand out.

This is a bank?! It was so big that I actually didn't realize...And, Garnet looked at the shocked me with a sarcastic laugh.

“It not only has to deal with the hundreds of thousands of gold coins in the property of the adventurers, but they're also responsible for the conversion of magic stones into actual coins. It has to be at least as robust as the castle, or things won't work.”

“It's being said that around one million gold coins are moving in and out every day. To make sure that they don't fall victim to robbery, they have to be prepared and have people on board to protect everything.”

A million gold coins in one day?! Just imagining that makes my head spin!

“I mean, with your equipment...No, nevermind.”

Garnet seemed like she wanted to say something, but she instead pulled on my hand as we entered the Empire's bank. Unlike the exterior resembling the one of a fortress, the inside had a clean floor filled with white marble stones, and although it was still early in the morning, a great mass of people was walking around.

“Welco—Welcome!”

The male employee that stood by the entrance gave us a quick glance, and after gulping, he quickly fixed himself and properly greeted us.

Ha, I bet that he was completely entranced by Rufa's beautiful face. Men are men after all, they can't help it.

“I doubt that it is because of the idiot princess here though.”

Garnet had a slightly fed-up expression on her face as she said that. Don't worry, Garnet! You're also plenty cute!

"You're just as much of an idiot I see."

How cruel, I was just praising you...

"Alba-sama, over here."

Feeling slightly depressed, Rufa pulled on my hand, and guided me to the 'Magic Stone Conversion' window close to us. Since the greater number of adventurers was still sleeping, our turn arrived pretty quickly.

"Welcome. Is this your first time using our business?"

A female employee, wearing a monocle, who seemed to in the latter half of her thirties greeted us with a calm voice...She's also pretty strong. Around the same as the inn proprietress from the Eternal Maiden?

As I was thinking that, the eye hidden behind her monocle suddenly started to sparkle.

"Dear guest, please don't treat me the same as that muscle freak if you would."

Why did she know what I was thinking?! Is she an esper like Garnet?!

Scary!

"Hey, don't lump me in together with that monster of a—It's nothing."

The employee's eyes showed another sparkle, and Garnet quickly stopped herself. As I was shaking even inside my armor, Rufa softly came closer to whisper something to me.

"Just like the Eternal Maiden-sama, this woman right here is also a former 6th ranker. So, don't even try to steal or swindle her, because that would end badly."

I immediately shook my head. I feel like if I tried to deceive her, I'd lose a finger, if not even more. And, as I was shaking to the bone, the employee repeated her words from before, as calm as ever.

"Dear guest, is this your first time using our business?"

"Yes."

"Then, could I ask for your adventurer card."

...Eh, I don't have anything like that. Looking at Garnet at a loss for what to do, she had a disgruntled expression on her face as she put one hand in the pocket of her skirt, and took out a small metallic plate, with words written on it.

"You receive this after you have graduated at the training ground, something like an identity card for adventurers. Without this, you won't be able to open up an account here, and you aren't allowed to buy anything dangerous like a magic scroll with 'Fireball' on it for example."

...Sorry. This is the first time I even heard of the existence of those training grounds. Wait, does this mean that I've been illegally entering the labyrinth? My face inside the mask went almost as pale as the ground beneath me, and as I gazed over at the employee with an instigating gaze, she took out a metallic plate similar to Garnet's out from beneath the counter.

"You can register here as well."

"Please."

I prostrated myself on the floor in front of her.

"Then, please tell me your name and family name. The name of your birthplace will suffice as well for the family name."

Maybe to avoid confusion if there are people with the same name. Since I don't have a family name, I gave her one of my birthplaces.

"Alba I Lapsel"

"Understood, please wait a moment."

As she finished hearing out my name, the employee held the metallic plate in her hands, as she started chanting something. Ohh, my name is being engraved in it!

"Alba-sama, with this, you're registered as an adventurer. I also created an account at the bank here, so feel free to entrust your money to us. Also, in the case that the card is lost, we will require an amount of five silver coins to reissue a new one."

As the employee warned me, she handed me the adventurer card. That's all it took, I guess. It's good that getting it didn't take too long, but I'm a bit worried that someone might steal money from me if they stole it.

"All employees remember your name and your face with the 'Common Storage' magic, so in the event that your card gets stolen, they can not illegally steal anything from you."

She was reading my heart again...Scary. Also, even if it's for my own safety, having everyone that works here remember my name and face is equally scary.

"I Laspel? Where did I hear that name before..."

Rufa was muttering something to herself, but I was too busy realizing just how scary the big city actually is.

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After turning all the magic stones we looted from the goblins and nords, we received 40 gold coins and 8 silver coins. Being told that there's an income tax even, we lost around 10%, which was pretty sad as a loss, but seeing it as your duty of being a resident of this city, it was something unavoidable. In the end, it was comparable to gathering apples for all the people in my hometown.

I tried to cheer myself up as I walked through the shopping district. Just as Rufa said, countless stores were lined up next to each other, reaching from a weapon and armor shop, to a miscellaneous store, and just looking around was enjoyable enough.

"Alba-sama, is there nothing you want to buy?"

Maybe Rufa thought that it was weird for me to just gaze through the window instead of actually stepping inside, as she pulled on my arm.

Hmmm...Since I want to build my own home as quickly as possible, I don't feel like wasting my money on anything unnecessary...Ah, there's one thing.

As I remembered something, I looked around the vicinity, spotted a store that might offer what I was looking for, and entered.

“Welco—Uwah, is that the rumoured Dark Knight?!”

The shop owner was a bearded male dwarf, and as he spotted us, his eyes went wide. While taking that as quite the unexpected reaction, I gazed over at the shelves filled with the assortment of goods, specifically gaudy and gorgeous looking jewelry.

“An accessory shop?” Rufa tilted her head, apparently not having expected my choice.

However, I didn’t come here to buy something for myself...Really, what should I do. Something expensive would probably feel pretty heavy on the other person, and since I don’t know what’s popular right now in the capital, I can only trust my own senses...As I was gazing through the mass of rings and necklaces, I felt something poke at my back. Turning around, I found Garnet, hiding behind Rufa’s back, looking up at me in a worried manner.

“If you wanted accessories, wouldn’t any other shop have sufficed? Like the shop across the street?” She said, as she quickly dashed away.

What’s gotten into her so suddenly? I was educated on gemstones and the like with Granny’s collection, so I think that I have a pretty good idea for this, and the assortment here looks pretty real to me, while the prices aren’t too high up. But then, the shop owner suddenly raised his voice at us.

“Wait, aren’t you Redberyl’s daughter?! Gahaha, what are you wearing, heavens!”

“Ugh, this is why I didn’t want to...”

Being pointed and laughed at at the same time, Garnet grid her teeth, as her face started to burn bright red. An acquaintance of some sort? Before I could question her myself, Rufa came over to explain it for me.

“Garnet’s father, Redberyl-sama, is a very famous swordsmith, working for the emperor and high nobles at times, and there’s no dwarf in this city that doesn’t know him.”

That means that Redberyl’s daughter is equally famous. So she’s basically also part of the elite here, huh. As I looked over at her in admiration, Garnet seemed to be sulking as she puffed out her cheeks.

“The amazing one is my father, and I’m nothing but his incompetent daughter...”

What is she talking about? I mean, this is their family business, so I’d feel bad for sticking my head into it...

“Still, you have no sex appeal whatsoever. How will you ever marry into a formidable family, looking like this?” The shop owner spoke up.

“Shut it!”

“Gahaha, your face doesn’t look threatening at all!”

The shop owner just laughed off the rage of Garnet. Really, what is he on about? With Garnet being this cute, I’d imagine that the guys would be chasing after her to marry her. As I was having these doubts, a dwarven

woman appeared from the back of the shop, and tapped the male dwarf on the shoulder.

"Dear, you're being rude to our customers."

"Gahaha, sorry sorry, I couldn't hold myself back, seeing Redberyl's daughter like this."

"I'm very sorry for my rude husband. It seems like I need to teach him some more delicacy." The woman gave a deep bow to Garnet.

"No, I'm used to it, so it's fine."

Garnet told her not to mind it with a bitter smile, but her gaze seemed a bit envious, as she gazed at the wife. Being a bit surprised at the whole situation, that was the same for me. The man must have gotten the wrong idea about that, as he let out a snort.

"A good woman, right? This glossy and sparkly black beard got it's own reputation in the shopping district."

Yes, from beneath her nose, until her chin, she had a full beard decorating her face. The long, bushy hair almost made you mistake her for a man.

"Dear, don't embarrass me in front of the customers." The wife complained, but she seemed awfully delighted still.

Watching this, I finally remembered. The dwarves are a folk that get attracted to the charm of beards. I heard about this from Gramps before, but I never met any in person, making me assume that he was only talking about men. To think a bearded lady is being treated as a beauty...I can totally get Gramps being an absolute fan of this, but it's a bit too high of a hurdle for me...Wait? So, since Garnet does not have any natural beard...

"Grrrr..." Indeed, said Garnet was watching this heartwarming scene with a jealous expression.

I figured. To me, she looks like a normal, cute girl, but in the eyes of the dwarves, she must lack important charm.

"Garnet may be a dwarf, but she was born with very thin body hair..." Rufa gave me the final piece of information I needed, naming the reason for Garnet's complex.

That's probably the reason why she kept putting a fake beard on. Before I could come up with anything to cheer up this poor girl in front of me, the shop owner raised a laughing voice yet again.

"Gahaha, to think his grandchild would end up like this, Redberyl must have it rough."

"....."

"Why not get yourself a man? They got bad eyes and don't understand the charm of a beard on a woman, so they might happily accept you."

"...Shut up." Garnet's voice was lacking her usual energy.

The shop owner's sharp words probably stabbed right into that complex of hers. If I had to guess, the shop owner probably didn't have that intention. Judging from Gramps' words 'The dwarves might be a hearty and lively race, but they have no delicateness and sensitivity besides in their fingertips', so that's probably what this is. I guess that Garnet must be an

exception, seeing that she can perfectly sense my emotions all the time. That being said, just because they don't have any delicacy doesn't mean they're allowed to hurt someone. Especially if that person is a comrade of mine—basically, a member of my family.

"Store owner." I released a fierce amount of dark aura from my body, approached the store owner crackling in joy, and spoke with a deep voice resembling a dark knight.

"Do be discreet with your humiliation towards my companion."

"Eek...I-I'm sorry!" The store owner let out a terrified scream, prostrating himself in front of me.





I mean, you don't have to apologize like that...Was I too forceful, I wonder? Reflecting on my actions, I pointed inside the showcase of the store, two pendants to be exact, and handed the money over to the wife. I even added a bit of extra money as an apology for my rough tone before.

"T-Thank you very much." The wife had a bit of a shocked expression on her face, as she took out the pendants from the box, handing it over to me.

"P-Please, spare me...!" The store owner on his end was still busy groveling on the floor.

Everything I could have said probably would have had a negative effect, so I just silently grabbed Garnet's hand, and left the shop.

"A-Alba?!"

I fully ignored her startled scream, and entered a small alley with no people around.

"What has gotten into you?" Rufa had chased after us in a rush, gazing up at me in confusion.

I mean, I just felt awful for embarrassing the shop owner like that, so I went to leave in a hurry, that's all. But, as these words didn't come out of my mouth, I instead put one of the pendants I just bought around Garnet's neck.

"This is...tsavorite?" She held the top of the pendant, radiating with a beautiful green, in her fingers, and pronounced the name of this gem. I heard before that dwarves would often 'Pronounce gem before milk' as babies, and it seems like that is correct here. Tsavorite Garnet — A gem of the garnet group with a strong green color.

"Why would you...?"

Well, all these magic stones I got from defeating these monsters, I felt bad keeping it all to myself. That being said, I didn't want to forcefully push money onto them, so I felt like a present was the perfect thing to do. When I pathetically attempted to tell Garnet about these thoughts, she put her hand on her mouth, snickering.

"You really are a kind one."

Really? My childhood friend always called me nothing but a fool though.

"But, why tsavorite?" Garnet asked, while playing with the gem between her fingers.

It didn't have that much of a deep meaning to it...But Garnet's name, it comes from the name 'garnet', given a group of minerals, right?

"Exactly. The dwarven race loves giving their children the name of minerals and stones."

I figured. Her beautiful red hair reminded me of a garnet.

"You...No, I guess saying it wouldn't change a thing." A sudden sigh escaped her lips. Why?

Either way, I felt like a gemstone as a present would be perfect for Garnet, but it might have lost in touch against her red hair, which is why I chose a different color.

"You actually have quite the eye, huh."

Gramps was a big fan of gems and jewels and all. Adding the greatness of his jet-black armor I'm wearing, that should be enough to tell, right?

"...Right." Another sigh came from Garnet.

She's going to lose her happiness at this rate, is she fine with that? Well, as mentioned before, I thought that a gem with a different color than her hair would be a much better fit, which is why I chose the green tsavorite. That's why I hope she'd just accept it.

"Well, it certainly looks good, so I'll gladly accept it." Garnet smiled happily, shaking the top part of the pendant.

Thank god. If she threw away what basically came up to five gold coins, I'd love myself up in my rented room.

"By the way, do you know what the tsavorite stands for?"

Umm, what was it again? I'm sure that Gramps would know.

"...Well, it makes sense that you wouldn't." Another sigh.

It wasn't anything like 'A woman who missed her chance to marry' or something of that sort, right?!

"Moron! Anyway, let me thank you." Garnet handed me a shart retort, and smiled brightly like the gem.

Hmmm...she's this cute, and yet she's not being regarded as charming by the dwarves because she doesn't have a beard? What a shame, is what I thought, when Rufa suddenly showed a complicated expression, as she broke between us.

"Um, you've been talking to yourself for quite some time now, Garnet. Did you finally go crazy?"

"I don't want you of all people to worry about me!" Garnet retorted, giving a jumping chop down on Rufa's head.

Not good, since Garnet is always good at guessing my thoughts, I forgot to even talk properly. Also, there was something else I had forgotten.

"Rufa."

"Yes?"

I showed her the other pendant I bought, as she turned towards me.

Following the thread of leather was a golden amber, a 100% naturally-made pendant. I heard that elves don't like metallic wares too much, unlike the dwarves, so I thought that amber rosin might be a better choice.

"Please accept this."

".....Yes."

After spacing out for a brief moment, Rufa cast her face down. I wonder, is a beauty like her already used to present likes these, or is it possibly too cheap for her? I mean, it was five gold coins...But, Rufa apparently guessed my anxiety, and grinned at me.

"Alba-sama, thank you very much. I will treasure it!"

Well, I'm happy for her words, even if she's just being considerate.

"The two of us will be off to fix our makeup for a brief moment, so could you wait here for us?" Rufa said in a hurry, grabbing Garnet's arm, and rushed deeper into this small alley.

It didn't look like her makeup was ruined though...Ah, the toilet, right.

'Hey, we were planning on winning him over, so why are the tables being turned on us?!'

'I don't remember him winning me over though.'

'Eh, your heart won't even budge after receiving such a wonderful present?

...So you actually had a thing for women, then?'

'As if!'

I heard the two of them exchange words, when they quickly returned, Rufa with a smile, and Garnet with a tired sigh.

"Thank you very much for waiting. Now, let's move on to the next stop."

Rufa said, as she took my arm, and started walking.

...Did she properly wash her hands after her toilet visit, I wonder?

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'That was too dangerous, we have to be more careful in the future.'

Whilst holding onto Alba's arm, Rufa warned herself.

'Possessing such a scary and strong-looking armor, yet handing out such considerate and well-thought presents, is this the famous gap moe I have heard of?!'

Letting out confused screams of agony inside her head, Rufa gazed at the pendant she just received. Though she was despised by human royalty for being an elf, there are those who are yet attracted to her even more, openly trying to win her heart with presents costing hundreds of gold coins.

However, as these presents often consisted of gold or silver, she never bothered to wear it on her body. As for the reason why, the elfish race possessed a tendency to dislike any metal on their skin.

'The natural charm of nature has a much bigger impact on a so-called naked race like ours, and a lot of people actually don't know about our metal allergy. Then again, we elves often just keep it a secret.'

For elves, with her long lives and beauty, they possessed a great sense of pride, never openly revealing their weaknesses. Her mother even would put a brave face, using a magic called 'Heal' to hide the reddened spots on her body whenever she was forced to wear metal in any shape or form. Though Rufa did indeed belong to the elvish race, because of her being half-human as well, her metal allergy wasn't as bad compared to her mother. However, if her contact with metal continued for several hours, even she would have to deal with these symptoms, so she generally avoided any rings, necklaces, as well as metal weapons or armor. If Alba's jet-black armor wasn't a magic tool, meaning that it was an object created by magic, she would probably refrain from holding his arm like this.

'That's why, he is...' Rufa gazed up at Alba's face, secretively.

He properly thought of the disposition all elves carried, and chose natural material for the pendant he gifted to Rufa.

‘Just where did he hear of this...?’

The more she thought about it, the more Alba turned into a being shrouded in mystery. First, there was his equipment, which was a perfect replica of the Dark Knight. Just how did he get that?

‘And...how did he manage to acquire an aura resembling a 6th floor ranker...’

Inside of the elvish race, there exist those geniuses that possess a grande amount of aura within them. However, without any training, that would only bring them to the 1st floor of the labyrinth, nearly not enough to defeat the horrors residing down on the 6th floor unless they vigorously trained.

Now, leaving aside the mainland, the only place where magic beasts are found at great mass is inside the underground labyrinth of the Goldot Empire. Thanks to the great amount of magical power amassed underground, monsters can be materialized. However, the best they can hope to defeat there are a small number of goblins or kobolds. That being said, even after ten years of hard work, dealing with these small monsters, you won’t be able to acquire an aura on the level of a 6th floor ranker.

‘Is he a former adventurer after all? But, why would he lurk around the 1st floor of the labyrinth then, and he seems awfully alienated to the city...’

The more she thought about it, the more she got confused.

‘He really is a mysterious person...I have to be more careful!’

She wanted to go in for the kill, and yet almost got intrigued by him even more, so Rufa slapped her cheeks to waken herself up.

“...?”

“No need to worry, she is probably thinking about something foolish again.”

Alba had tilted his head in confusion, but Garnet just sighed in disbelief at Rufa’s action. At the same time, they arrived at their next destination.

‘It took around three hours now. We should have taken a horse carriage I suppose.’ Rufa rested her feet for a brief moment, and glanced at the horse carriage at the corner of the street. With two hundred thousand people living in the most outer circumference of the capital, the 9th district was as big as expected. It was about the level of a middle-class city. Even just walking around for shopping was harsh work if you weren’t an adventurer used to it.

‘I know that the circumstances here aren’t the greatest, living closest to both monsters and adventurers, but can they not make it a bit more convenient I wonder?’

As Rufa was thinking that, she turned a considerate expression towards Alba.

“You must be tired from this long walk, my apologies.”

“No.”

“That’s Alba-sama for you, what healthy legs you have. But, I happened to grow exhausted, so could we take a quick rest?” Rufa said, gazing up at Alba.

'Ask for consideration, praise him, and show him how weak and fragile of a girl I am. It's perfect!'

'I didn't know you worked part-time as a clown.'

Garnet raised one eyebrow with a snort. Naturally, Rufa understood the intention of his right away.

"...How's it feel to be clean down there with no need of shaving."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to say that!"

"...?!" Alba's back twitched at the sudden outburst of rage by Garnet.

Only Rufa knew that Garnet had no hair growing even in her most precious place.

"What happened?" Alba asked.

"I just thought that Garnet's skin looked silky smooth."

"Yeah, you're right."

"...Tch, you better remember this." Garnet was forced to accept Alba's subconscious words of praise, and clicked her tongue.

In the face of such, Rufa showed a victorious smile, slipped past the city gate, and set foot on the fourth part of the district. Right that second, a scent of alcohol and makeup came floating towards them.

"This is the so-called flower of the capital, the pleasure quarter."

Unlike before during the afternoon, now with no sorts of street stalls or play parlors around, it had a much more calm atmosphere to it. Instead of this, women appeared out of their buildings, wearing light clothing, inviting people towards them and their back alleys.

"I assume you have interest in these sorts of establishments, Alba-sama?"

**".....Shake shake."**

Rufa had asked him with a flustered expression, to which the helmet resembling a devil shook to the left and right at great momentum.

"Is that so. I'm relieved that you are a sincere person, Alba-sama."

Although she showed relief on the outside, Rufa grew even more wary inside her heart.

'He has no interest in cheap women. That means he is going for someone like me, who has hegemonial influence on the Goldot Empire, and has a noble lineage.'

No way a man of power like Alba would hold thoughts such as 'I want to do this thing with the person I love' and 'I want to save money on this' and so forth.

'If you think that way. Just keep living in that fantasy world of yours.'

'Garnet, could you stop reading my thoughts?'

Hearing the retort of her trusted friend, Rufa gave a faint warning back. She pulled on Alba's arm even stronger, aiming for the certain establishment she had in mind.

"Let us take a brief rest here."

It stood in the middle of the pleasure quarter, a bit above the other buildings, giving off a noble and proper vibe. The inside had been designed in a calm fashion, with tables and chairs made out of ebony, even

possessing a cooking chef with the regular cooking hat on his head. With no dunkards or aggressive folks around like you'd see in taverns, the place was indeed filled with gentlemen and noble women.

"They offer simple snacks as well, but the main appeal is the sweets here."  
"...?!"

The second Rufa spoke those words with a smile, Alba shook greatly like a lightning had passed through his body.

'Oh? Is Alba-sama the type of man who would be embarrassed to enter an establishment offering sweets?' Alba looked even more adorable to Rufa, which is why her smile widened.

She could have never imagined that a Dark Knight like him would react in such a way because of a mere sweets store. There's no way that he could just be a small fry from a rural area. As Rufa was thinking that, Garnet stepped forth, and carefully rubbed Alba's back.

"Calm down. This might seem high-class, but one piece here is about three silver coins, so they won't suck out all your money like those other establishments aimed at rich people."

"...?!"

Alba did the math in his head. With just one silver coin, he could stuff his belly at the Eternal Maiden, and yet a single piece of food here costs three times as much. He was about to scream out in shock at this revelation, but barely kept the agony inside of him. Rufa on her end arrived at an open table close to them, and swiftly called the waitress closer.

"Excuse me, we'd like the peach compote with the rose crown strawberry ice cream and three chocolate sticks doubles please."

"Understood. Please wait a moment."

The waitress must have seen that she dealt with the 7th princess of the Empire in front of her, but most possibly because of her good training, she showed no reaction at all, just politely taking their order. At the same time, Alba muttered a confused 'Peach com...a spell?' to himself, which was covered up by his demonic mask, so Rufa didn't even pick up on that.

"I went ahead and ordered for us, but was there something you disliked, Alba-sama?"

"No."

"That is good to know. Also, is there anything you particularly like?"

"...Apples."

"Is that so. I will order something with that at a later date then."

Although Rufa gave a polite answer on the front, after Alba's short hesitation, her brain was already working full speed ahead.

'Apples, is it. They grow everywhere, so I won't be able to identify his place of origin.'

If it was a fish of the ocean, he would have been someone living close to the coast, and if he answered with meat, it could have been somewhere in the mountains, assuming he specified it on goat meat, and if it was cow meat, she could have guessed somewhere in the plains. There are other localities

that prohibit pig meat, and in the event of it being staple food, it would have been somewhere to the east.

‘Maybe I should start looking for this ‘I Lapsel’ family name that Alba-sama has!’

Rufa thought so, and went deeper into her analysis.

‘He is using the Empire’s language—the mix between east and west. He seems able to read the billboards and signs throughout the place as well, and since he properly paid for the pendants, he is able to do simple calculations. I’m sure he must have been educated well.’

There are many folks mixed in the ranks of adventurers that can’t properly read or write. The children with no education left, having grown up on the fields or alone without a family as thieves often end up as adventurers after all. These children, with no place to return to, keep fighting and fighting, making them the greater mass of adventurers. However, Alba gave off no signs of belonging to that group. He himself felt like an irregular existence.

‘Possessing this much confidence, it’s either the real deal, or a real moron.’

And this Dark Knight Alba undoubtedly belonged to the first group.

“Why are you just deducing that?” Garnet showed a tired expression, but Rufa skillfully ignored her, instead gazing at the sweets the waitress brought towards them.

“Thank you very much for waiting. Here we have the peach compote with the rose crown strawberry ice cream and three chocolate stick doubles.”

“Wow, that looks delicious!” Rufa showed great delight, scooping up a bit of ice cream, and pushed it in front of the demonic mask Alba’s. “Alba-sama, open wide~”

**“...?! Shake Shake!”**

Alba frantically shook his head left and right again, but Rufa fully ignored that with a smile. Although a big portion of this idiot couple reenactment was to have Alba fall for her, Rufa actually had a different approach in mind.

‘Now, show me your face, which is hidden behind that mask!’

Unless he took off this demonic mask, he would not be able to eat the ice cream.

‘If the being behind this mask truly belonged to the race of demons, then we have to let the town guards deal with this. If he were to be a human, then that would prove him being a former adventurer, no doubt.’

The name of being an adventurer is granted after graduating from the training grounds located in the 10th area of the district, but that has been the case for many thousands of years.

“Now now, don’t be embarrassed, just open wide~”

With the most perfect smile she could have managed, trained during her long years as the princess, she continued to push the spoon towards Alba. By doing so, Alba was forced to react in some way, so he put one hand on his mask—and together with a metallic sound, only the mouth of it opened.

“Eh?”



"Delicious."

Alba gulped down the spoon held by the speechless Rufa, and gave his impression towards the strawberry ice cream. Following that, he scooped up a bit of ice cream on his own spoon, and offered it to Rufa.

"Here."

"Eh, ah, ehh?!"

The second their positions got reversed, Rufa blushed furiously.

'I never did something so couple-esque before! Not even with my mother?!'

'I'm pretty sure you did. Like when she was breastfeeding you', Garnet threw in a cold retort.

Oddly enough, Rufa didn't reject her friend this time, but instead sought out help.

'Garnet, please do something!'

'Just eat it?'

'Doing it to him is one thing, but having a man do it to me is way too embarrassing!'

'I don't get it. But, whatever.'

Garnet sighed in resignation, and pushed her own body towards Alba's spoon, biting down on it.

"...?"

"Delicious. Here, as gratitude."

Alba tilted his head in confusion, but Garnet swiftly ignored such a gesture to scoop up a bit of her own ice cream and did as he did a second ago. At the same time, Rufa observed Alba's mouth closely, as he bit down on the spoon.

'He doesn't have the dwarven-typical beard, yet neither does he have sharp teeth like an orc. I highly doubt that an elf would wear such restraining armor either, so he must be a normal human male.'

His skin color seemed relatively young, presumably in his twenties. Though sadly she didn't manage to see his face fully, she at least made some good progress overall.

'That being said, he has some beautiful lips for being a man.'

Her expectations grew bigger, as she tried to peek deeper into the opening of his mask. However, before that, Garnet pushed another spoonful towards him.

"Next is the peach compote, I'd say. Here, open up."

"...!"

"It's good? Glad to hear that. What about the chocolate sticks then?"

"...!!!"

"Delicious as well? Fufu, this takes me back to the dog a house in my neighbourhood kept."

".....**Crack!**"

Being forced to watch the lovey-dovey actions of Alba and Garnet, Rufa couldn't take it anymore, and kicked her feet at her with full force.

"Ouch! What are you doing!"

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm jealous at the fact that he's feeding you like this!"

"I really don't like the sound of that!"

Garnet had to take a few steps back, seeing that Rufa previously announced she had a thing for men. Right as Alba went off to say something to the two, a loud voice filled the inside of the establishment.

"Why are you here?!"

Standing in the entrance door of the store, with one hand on her sword, was none other than the 6th floor rank adventurer God-Speed Chidori, as her black ponytail shook. Naturally, her gaze was glued to the face of the Dark Knight Alba.

".....**Clack.**"

Without uttering a word, Alba closed the mouth of his mask, and accepted Chidori's gaze fully without stepping back. However, Rufa broke between them, with a perfect smile.

"It has been a while, Chidori-sama."

"Princess?!"

Only now realizing the presence of Rufa, Chidori awkwardly averted her gaze.

'She probably still seems a bit hung up on the fact that she rejected us joining her clan. For possessing this much skill, she is quite the honest person,' Rufa flashed a devilish evil in her head.

Thanks to the help of Garnet, she managed to slip out of the royal castle, and after becoming an adventurer here in the 9th district, she went around asking the other 6th floor rankers for assistance. However, because of her lacking skill and the bothersome aspect of it, every attempt of joining a strong clan ended up in failure. That being said, Rufa never held any grudges towards these, as she was the one at fault for leeching off their strength.

At the same time, whatever their goal may be, there is also the chance that Chidori's group might make it down to the 6th floor, and save the Empire themselves. That being said, Rufa wasn't as kindhearted as to not use this opening Chidori provided.

"Unlike Chidori-sama, Alba-sama was kind enough to reach out for us with a helping hand, a truly kind person! Unlike Chidori-sama!"

"Ugh..."

"I don't think you need to repeat it like that."

Watching Chidori clearly feel bad about her decision, Garnet gave a sharp retort, which was completely ignored by Rufa.

"I could judge Alba-sama's kindness just by his appearance alone, so aren't you embarrassed to ready your blade at my benefactor?"

Chidori is a samurai—meaning that she comes from a military family to the east, thus possessing great pride, and Rufa kept stabbing at this relentlessly. Thanks to this, the warrior girl felt forced to take off her hand of her blade's scabbard.

"...It is just as you state, Princess, I am not as rightful and benevolent as this person. At the same time, I shall not put any worry and shame on my name by bothering these innocent folks around." Chidori said, turning towards the terrified customers and waitresses, showing a deep bow. Ending this action, she walked past Alba, while glaring at him, and sat on the counter.

"White pearl cream with red azuki beans topping, green tea warabimochi, six of them."

"Same as always then!" The cook gave a smile and started cooking.

That order alone was enough to give you a heartburn.

"...That's a 6th floor ranker for you."

"Indeed."

Rufa and her group could only observe the mountain of sugar delivered to the warrior girl in awe. No matter how many calories she burnt during combat, was this really good for her leath? On the side of this sat Alba, openly confused, only to resume eating their three gold coins' worth food.

\*

To think we'd run into the black-haired girl—Chidori in a place like this. After we separated from the sweets store, that had me nervous in one too many ways, I could finally let out a sigh inside my mask. Chidori even tried to slash at me the second we met again, might she be some overly-aggressive Berserker class?

No, possibly not. If she really was a Berserker, then she would have sliced at me with a 'Chest!' scream, at least according to my teacher. Then, what else could be the reason? Is it the hot-bloodedness of an adventurer like her? As I was thinking that, I heard voices resembling a fight right up in front of us.

"You bastard, what's your problem!"

"Dear customer, our establishment is a place for people to casually drink some alcohol, not to harass our waitresses."

"Huh? You're charging me one silver coin for a cup, and now you even complain at me?"

From a distance, I could see three rough-looking men having a verbal fight with a middle-aged worker, right in front of a bar.

"Seems like those folks got kicked out. Probably for mistaking a bar and club here."

"Judging from their clothes, they don't seem to be residents of the capital."

"Probably some mercenaries from the rural area around."

Not even bothering with the conflicted gazes around them, the men kept screaming forth and forth, as Garnet and Rufa calmly analyzed the situation. As a fellow man who escaped the rural area, I can understand their feelings to a certain limit, but troubling the people from the store is also...I decided to step in and stop them, when it happened.

"Stop fucking with me!"

One of the men screamed in rage, and aimed his fist at the employee.

“Careful!”

I raised my voice, but didn’t make it in time when the fist of the men directly connected with the employee’s head—

“Gyaaaa!”

Or so I thought, when the man raised a roar of agony, blood spurting from his fist.

“W-What did you do?!”

With the result of the one setting out for a punch being the one hurt, the man’s friends watched this scenery in shock. It really cannot be helped. As long as you’re not an adventurer, you wouldn’t be able to tell what just happened. In the split-second before the man’s fist connected, the employee, most likely a former adventurer, created thorns of Aura in front of his face. If a normal person were to punch at this, the result is as you can see.

“Dear customer, if you need treatment, the nearest temple is in the seventh area.”

“Y-You...You better remember this!” The other men hissed at the grinning employee, and lent their injured friend a shoulder.

Is he going to be okay? I hope he’s got enough money to heal himself...

“Even though he fully deserved that, you still went to try and help him, right?” Garnet appeared from behind my back, giving me a smile, mixed with a bit of disbelief.

To be honest, with him being a fellow country boy like me, I felt a bit of sympathy, that’s all...Still, I never thought that a pleasure quarter would have such ruffians in them. Knowing that there’s strong ex-adventurers like that employee is a big relief, but I can’t help feeling a bit scared. Let’s not stay here for too long.

“I mean, you are the main source of everyone’s fear right now...”

Garnet let out another sigh, which I ignored, and just pulled her along the main street on fast feet. Right as I wanted to pass the gate that would lead us to the 3rd area, Rufa stopped me.

“Alba-sama, there is no need to go any further than this.”

Eh, really? I heard that the 3rd area is merely a big open plain, but we still haven’t seen the 2nd and 1st area of the district. But, Garnet already guessed my thoughts.

“I’m sorry to tell you, but the 1st and 2nd area here are a graveyard. Even if you went there, it won’t be any fun.”

I see, with nobody to visit there, I have no need to go there indeed. But then, wouldn’t it have been fine to stay in the entrance area of this place? I looked over at Rufa, emitting as much confusion as I could, when she pointed at the side of the gate, slightly flustered.

“I am terribly sorry, but there is one more establishment that I wanted to show you, Alba-sama.”

When I looked over, I was greeted by a great amount of men and women, standing in the middle of an open space. Um, I can’t see the place like this?

Wondering what this was about, I gazed upwards, when a giant basket came slowly soaring down from the sky.

“Wha?!”

“Fufu, are you surprised? This is the Goldot Empire’s famous ‘Viewing Basket’.” Rufa grinned, and pointed at a billboard near the open space. Let me see, let me see...For five silver coins per person, you can enjoy a trip through the sky. How about you enjoy the sight of the capital together with someone important to you?

“Thank you very much. Then, the next customers please.”

A man and woman came out of the basket’s door, and another couple entered. Following that, the former adventurer next to the basket, seemingly a magician, turned towards the basket and swung their wand.

“Be freed from this start’s warning, dance high up into the sky, ‘Levitation’.”

Aura wrapped up the basket, and went up into the air, together with the couple inside. I see, so this is a method for other races which can’t fly to enjoy the scenery up in the clouds. Can’t you see everything up high then?! There’s no need to directly visit every small place ourselves. Brimming with excitement, I grabbed Rufa’s hand and lined up.

“A-Alba-sama, you don’t have to be so pushy...” Rufa started blushing happily.

It seems like she’s as excited as I am. If she can’t wait anymore, then I should just—No, let’s not. Gramps told me to be careful with that. But, five silver coins for one person is a bit expensive...And, as I was thinking about that, a female employee, probably staff of this place, came talking to me.

“Um, dear customer, there is a weight limit on the viewing basket, so riding it with a full-body armor is...”

I see, I figure that just lifting up two people might be enough work, so armor is a no-go.

“Alba-sama, it can’t be helped, so please take off your armor!” Rufa looked at me with radiating eyes, rushing me.

Do elves have the desire to even make other races go naked? I would rather not see a prison cell from the inside, and if anything, this jet-black armor has been created by condensing magical power, making it a magical tool and not a metallic tool, so it’s actually more light than most things. To show that, I jumped up a few times. Ah, I guess I should take off the greatsword on my back? I don’t find a place to put it down, so I guess stabbing it into the ground should be enough. **Slash!**

“...I understand, that will be enough.” The employee showed a terrified expression like she had just been threatened by a murderer, lowered her head, and took a few steps back.

Man, she’s just like the waitress at the sweets store, the people of the Empire sure are polite. Though I feel like a lot of them are hidden monsters like that bar employee before.

“...Tch.”

I heard someone clicking their tongue next to me, but Rufa would not do such a thing, I knew that, so who was it? I tilted my head in confusion, when I found Garnet standing right next to my greatsword.

"I'll keep a lookout on this, so you just enjoy yourselves."

"Hm?"

"I'm not going. It says only two people can ride on it, right?"

Ah, that's right. But, I'd feel bad for leaving her behind. I know! Rufa and Garnet just have to ride on it instead!

"You're forcing two girls on this? What kind of punishment is that supposed to be?" Garnet sighed.

"What do you mean?"

"...Well, I should have known that you wouldn't understand." Garnet shrugged her shoulders.

No no, I totally understand. You're supposed to take this ride with someone precious to you—which basically means that you two friends should ride it together!

"Enough of that, just get on it."

My opinion had been ignored fully, as Garnet pushed my back, forcefully returning me to Rufa's place. And, after a few minutes of waiting, our turn came up.

"The next customer plea—Eh?! ...A-Ahh, the rumoured Dark Knight." After freezing up for a second, the magician showed a satisfied expression.

...Just how many people have heard of me by now? I'm getting a bit embarrassed at this sudden growth in fame. As I was grinning to myself, Rufa grabbed my hand, and smiled.

"Let's hurry and hop on!"

Yeah, standing here too long in a daze would be a bother for all the people waiting behind us. I handed the price for the both of us to the magician, and hopped on the basket together with Rufa. Inside was a one long-stretched chair, allowing the two of us to sit. It was narrow enough that our shoulders touched, but it can't be helped.

"Then, here we go."

Confirming that the two of us had taken our seats, the magician used their floating spell again. Following that, we slowly started to ascend. Now we could see the entire capital, without being restrained by the various walls in our way.

"Amazing..." I feel bad for this lack of expression, but I was honestly at a loss for words.

The walls extended in long circles, with countless small houses in between them, and the royal capital in the center of it all, shining pure white. From up here, the capital of the Goldot Empire looked like a piece of art, telling the thousand years of history that had passed when people first started living here. When I was at a loss for words, Rufa talked to me.

"Alba-sama, this is the Goldot Empire."

"Yeah."

"Even though a gigantic underground labyrinth extends beneath the surface, most people aren't even aware of it, just living their lives."

"Yeah."

"I don't think of this as a bad thing. Because the hearts of people are not strong enough to live through a daily-life drenched in fear."

"Yeah."

I knew that she was talking about something very important, but I could only focus on the scenery in front of me, overwhelmed by it, unable to utter anything else.

"Alba-sama, you plan on becoming the owner of your own residence here in this Empire, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then, as the Emperor and his duty to save his folk, would you please aim for the deepest part of the labyrinth?"

"Yeah."

...Hm? I feel like I made some horrible promise just now? I tore away my gaze from the scenery in front of me, and looked over at Rufa. Her eyes emitted a strong and serious light, not allowing me to talk my way out of this with a 'Sorry, I wasn't listening', sadly.

"...I promise."

I started sweating profusely inside of my helmet, seeing no other option but to answer with these words. As a reaction to that, Rufa's tense face softened up, and a smile appeared like a blooming flower.

"Thank you very much. As proof once you have fulfilled this promise, I will offer you my everything."

Rufa's smile as she said those words was all too beautiful, I started sweating even more. Was that just now...a proposal?! Giving a vague response to this, what kind of man would I be! The worst! The worst, I say! But, this isn't some love story where the princess falls for the prince at first glance, and I really don't think she is the type of person to propose to a man she met not even two days ago. I want to confirm just what Rufa said. But, asking her to 'Say it again?' would make me a disgrace of a man!

"Dear customer, how was your ride?"

The voice of the magician surprised me, and I raised my head in shock. Without me realizing it, the basket with us inside had arrived on the ground. Apparently, me worrying like this cost all the time we had in the air...Wait, now I forgot to probably see the surroundings and where all the stores I needed are located! Embarrassed at this failure of mine, I grew silent and swiftly left the basket to not trouble the waiting customers.

"And, how was it? Got a good view?"

"Yes, it was a truly wonderful time."

Garnet brought me by greatsword, and asked us for our impression. Oh yeah! Maybe Garnet can guess my thoughts, and ask Rufa for me!

"Hm, what's wrong?"

She quickly realized that I wanted her attention, so I gazed down into her blue eyes, passionately as possible. Please, I can only rely on you!

"...Sorry, I plan on taking a dwarf husband for the sake of my family, so I can't answer your feelings."

She totally got the wrong idea.

"I see, with your own home and castle, a single woman won't be able to satisfy you," Rufa chimed in.

And another misunderstanding was born.

'That Dark Knight, he's not satisfied with an elf girl, and tries to violate that dwarf girl as well?'

'It must be one of those adventurers that goes to collect all sorts of races with him. The worst...'

'Not to mention an elf that looks just like the princess...I'm so jealous—I won't forgive him!'

And now I was being treated like the devil. Unable to bear the cold gazes around me, I picked up the greatsword, readied it on my back, and ran away at full speed.

\*

Rufa and Garnet somehow managed to catch up with Alba, and they returned to the inn district of the 7th area.

"Alba-sama, I had a lot of fun today."

"Yeah."

"Now then, we will see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you."

Rufa gave a beaming smile as she escorted Alba back to his apartment, and separated again. And, the second she entered her own room, she threw off her highly-suggestive dress.

"Fuu...I know it was to seduce Alba-sama, but faking half the day like that sure was tiring."

"So you're finally taking off your clothes, exhibitionist race." Garnet scolded Rufa, but equally swiftly took off her goth loli clothing, and put on her fake beard in her underwear appearance.

"Why don't you just throw that away already? Alba-sama will be happier that way."

"No. Way. In. Hell!"

"Really, being stubborn like a solid rock is just like you dwarves." Rufa complained in a light tone as she put on her room-wear, resting on the bed.

"That being said, today truly was a successful day."

She managed to confirm that Alba was no devil, but rather an average young human male. At the same time, although he is aiming to be a ruler in this Empire, she equally managed to receive the promise of him challenging the depths of the labyrinth.

"Even if I am scorned as the princess of this Empire, as long as the two hundred thousand inhabitants of the capital are saved, I will accept this."



"Yeah."

"If anything, thinking of kicking out this shitty old man of mine is something to look forward to."

"No, please don't." Garnet got a bad premonition, but Rufa just ignored this with an arrogant snort.

"Hmpf, a shitty old man that doesn't listen to his daughter's honest warning deserves to be kicked out for all I care!"

"The birth of a new dictator."

"Anyway, I'll just forget about my shitty parents, and focus on my parasite life starting tomorrow."

"Truly like a shitty daughter."

"Fufu, after spending such a joyful date with us today, there is no mistaking it that Alba-sama will gladly fight for us."

"You say that, as you almost got seduced by him instead?"

"Why do you keep complaining all the time!"

"I thought it was good manners to retort to your idiocy."

Throwing a fit, Rufa got up from the bed. Right as they were to start their usual banter, she remembered something.

"Garnet, does the name 'I Lapsel' ring any bells with you?"

"You mean Alba's name? Never heard about that before." Garnet shook her head, and took out a world map from the bookshelf nearby.

It was something that Rufa had borrowed for the rest of her life from the royal castle, which showed even smaller regions and locations. However, no matter how long she searched for it, nothing came to sight.

"Maybe he just randomly came up with that name?"

"No, I faintly remember hearing it somewhere." Rufa said, and took out an old book. "I think it was during my studies on legends...Ah, there it is!"

"Let me see."

Garnet sat next to Rufa, gazing at the book.

"I Lapsel, a legendary island of fairies located in the sea to the far west."

"Basically, a pseudonym?" Rufa showed a darkened expression, and Garnet nodded along.

"Probably. He seems like the type of person to admire legends like these."

If he was told that the legendary holy sword Excalibur rested in the depths of the labyrinth, he must be the type to jump into the fray.

"No, maybe the cursed magic sword Balmung?"

"Either way is fine. In the end, we didn't find many hints about him..."

Just when Rufa thought she had a good grasp on the existence called Alba, he slipped past her.

"I've gotten hungry. Garnet, go buy something."

"How about you learn to cook for yourself and try to win over ALba with that?"

"I've been raised as a princess, there's no way I would start with that now!"

"Then you just have to work harder."

“You say that, but you can’t cook either, right!”

“I-I sure can! Just...the vegetables I’m cutting turn out too distorted...”

“Hehehe, you’re a dwarf, yet you have no fine touch at all?”

“You damned wench...!”

Now the two of them started verbally bantering for real, as the place was filled with screams of rage.

1 [Tsavorite](#)

2 Jelly-like confection made from Bracken starch

3 Here written as ‘Island of Supreme Bliss’

## Chapter 2: Bottomless Darkness

Having seen the luxuries this town has to offer yesterday, I woke up before the sunrise, full of energy...About the part where people called me a lecher of a man because I had two girls with me, let's just forget about that. Gramps also told me not to dwell in memories that I can't influence anymore. But, Grandma always gave Gramps a harsh punishment because of that, so maybe we both have something to learn still.

Feeling slightly melancholic, I finished a light breakfast and left my lodging, heading over to the apartment Rufa and Garnet were living in.

"Good morning, Alba-sama."

"It's great that you get up early in the morning, but the armor of the Dark Knight really doesn't fit you."

These two had already prepared themselves for the departure, and we headed to the labyrinth together. Today I'll work hard for the amount I rested yesterday! With these feelings, we entered the labyrinth, and walked to the first intersection.

He he he, now that Rufa joined my group, there's no need to walk around in the wide labyrinth.

"Then, I will use magic to attract the monsters. Please take care of the rest."

"Got it." I nodded, to which Rufa started chanting.

"Strum the air, tell the evil, your enemy is right here. [Alarm]."

Rufa's Aura passed through her wand, spreading around the area, creating an unfamiliar **Beep beep** alarming sound. This magical sound reverberated along the walls, reaching into the deepest parts. Waiting for a brief moment, footsteps could be heard upfront, left and right, approaching us. In total, they seemed to be around 40...No, 50...I can't, there's too many footsteps, but I figure it has to be above 100.

"Hey, isn't this far more than the day before yesterday?"

"I can also hear the footsteps of some trolls in there."

Garnet and Rufa showed a cold sweat on their faces, hiding behind my back.

"Alba-sama, I hate to be selfish, but could I ask you to gather the monsters and defeat them?"

Gather? Since I know where they're coming from, I can just send off a Blade of Aura, and crush them directly. That sounds much more fun to me at least.

"Aren't you quite the fiend." Reading my mind, Garnet showed a slightly worried expression.

That's a bit upsetting. My teacher told me "Cowardice is the excuse of the loser. Falsehood, surprise attack, sneak attack, everything is fair on the battlefield", so I think killing them from afar is the correct choice, you know.

"I don't object with that logic. But, there's no reason to defeat the monsters at a far distance like this."

Meaning?

"If you don't get showered with the monsters' magical power, you won't get stronger."

"Ahhh!" I subconsciously raised a voice.

That's right, by hunting monsters, you can strengthen your own Aura. Since I've only been fighting the spirits that Gramps summoned, the idea that I could get stronger here by fighting the monsters completely slipped my mind. Feeling motivated, I stood in the middle of the intersection.

"Alba-sama?! I don't think that even you can handle such a great number of monsters!"

"That's right. We should fight in one path at the time."

Rufa and Garnet tried to stop me as they came running, but I just signaled with my hand that they should crouch down. Don't worry, what I'm about to use is more effective the wider the location is. As long as they're crouching they're completely fine. Those standing are pretty much in danger though.

"...I'm putting my faith in you, so don't betray us."

"I don't quite get it, but we can put our trust into Alba-sama."

Garnet showed a terrified expression as she crouched down on the floor, and Rufa followed up. Watching this, I readied my greatsword at my waist, and turned my gaze towards the wave of monsters coming from all sides.

...Too far...too far...three more steps...two...now! I turned towards the monsters that were right up at my nose, swung my greatsword with a mowing motion, and turned around on the spot. The aura coming out from the tip of the blade formed an arc, tearing the approaching monsters to pieces.

Black Shadow Style, Sword Magic - Full Moon

Normally, you would use this technique in pitch-black darkness where you can't even see your own hands and feet, to defeat enemies lurking in the darkness, but this is yet another use for it. With this crescent blade of aura, the monsters had been neatly split in two, turned into light, and dissolved.

So bright! Rather than some full moon, this is the sun...Ah, I happened to cut the walls of the labyrinth as well, but nobody will ask me for repairs, right? Next to me, Rufa slowly got up from her crouching position.

"Fufufufu, I can feel all the magical power pouring into my body!"

"You really are like a parasite..."

As the complete opposite of Rufa laughing maniacally, Garnet felt apologetic. Hmm...this isn't even 1/100 the amount of magical power I received when I defeated Ifrit-sensei, so maybe we were lacking more monsters?

"You're thinking about something ridiculous again, aren't you?"

I was just thinking that it might be quicker to have Gramps come over here, and have him get some high-ranking spirits that we can level quickly. I'm sure he'd come running if I told him about these two cute girls.

"I'll gladly pass on that. I can already see things ending badly." Garnet complained, shaking her head.

Yeah, Grandma would probably keep Gramps locked up in fear of him running off and cheating again.

"Now then, Alba-sama, let's keep going like this and kill monsters until the area is absolutely empty!"

"Wait a second."

Rufa was about to cast another magic spell to call over the monsters, but I raised my hand and stopped her.

"...Maybe we leech off Alba-sama too much?" Rufa asked with a saddened expression, but I shook my head.

I don't really know what she means by leeching or whatever, but there's something more important than that.

"Let's collect the magic stones."

This is all for my objective of buying my own house!

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"This will be 500 gold coins." The employee at the bank told me, and handed me the bankbook.

After that, we continued to gather monsters by using Alarm, until we killed more than 500 monsters, and exchanged the magic stones into coins.

Adding together the trolls we killed, we actually gathered some insane amount...Continuing this for 200 more times, I should be able to amass the 100.000 gold coins.

Of course, this goal is still a long distance away, but the realization that it wasn't impossible gave me a boost in confidence, as I flashed a smile inside my mask, and left the bank behind me.

"Fufufu, my body is overflowing with Aura. In terms of skill, we should be ready for the 2nd floor."

"Don't rush things now. Though, I get what you're saying."

As we walked to the lodging district, Rufa and Garnet were smiling themselves. All the reward was given to me again, are they going to be fine in terms of rent and all that?

"No need to worry. We have enough wealth that we can leisurely live like this."

"Yes, I've sold all the useless metal accessories in my possession after all."

The two said, trying to dispel my worries...I mean, if they say so...But, when she says accessories, I can't help but feel worried.

"Of course, I will never give away this precious item you've given to me, Alba-sama," Rufa said, as she showed me the amber pendant hanging down from her neck.

I bought it on a whim, but I'm glad to know that she likes it.

"Fufu, that's more points for me."

"You really are an underhanded princess."

Rufa was muttering something to herself, only to receive a tired gaze from Garnet. She might look younger than Rufa, but this attitude and act makes her feel like an older sister, or a mother even.

"I don't want my future daughter to be such a stupid moron."

"How rude. I don't mind calling you Mama, Garnet."

"Can you not!?"

Garnet seemed to be in a bad mood, as she pushed away Rufa, who was clinging to her face.

"But, with this much strength we have accumulated, albeit by using foul methods, we might be able to challenge the Guardian soon."

The Guardian, huh. I heard words here and there, but I don't know too much. Garnet picked up on my lack of knowledge it seems, as she let out a sigh, and explained.

"Together with the floors inside the labyrinth, there exist these so-called 'Guardians', which are essentially extraordinary monsters."

"As long as you don't defeat that Guardian, you won't be able to make your way to the lower floors."

So they're protecting the stairs that lead to the lower floors?

"No, it's a bit more complicated. You see, stairs don't exist in the labyrinth."

What do you mean? How can you move deeper then? ...Ah, I see, there's gotta be a ladder or a pit!

"It's not anything like that either. Though, it might be similar."

"To put it frankly, by defeating the Guardian, you will be teleported to the floor below." Rufa said, sending a glance at the waist of an adventurer that just passed us. "Did you see that white medal hanging down from his waist?"

Yeah, he was wearing that. I always thought it was some special fashion of the capital, but apparently I was wrong.

"If you defeat the Guardian, you can earn yourself such a medal. If you carry this with you, a secret passage will open at the entrance of the 1st floor. Using the magic square found there, you can teleport to the lower floors immediately.

Eh, the labyrinth had such a hidden gimmick?! So cool! Seeing me getting excited, Garnet gave a warning comment.

"The white medal is the proof that you've defeated the Guardian of the 1st floor, the 'Indolent Sloth'."

"Basically, he received the right to move on to the 2nd floor of the labyrinth, making him a 2nd floor ranker."

I see, so that's how you split apart the different ranks of the adventurers.

"However, there are lots of adventurers who hide this medal somewhere in their clothes."

"I'm sure he must be intent on bragging that he just became a 2nd floor ranker."

Rufa and Garnet showed a wry smile, but I can totally sympathize with him. It's like wanting to show everyone the cast-off skin of a snake! Though I got hit with a Meteor Kick by my childhood friend when I did that.

"Well, even if you were to get it stolen or lost it somewhere, the Guardian will reappear the next day, so you can fight them again to get it back."

"And, even if you were to suddenly get the medal through any means, as long as you haven't defeated the Guardian, you can't move to the lower floors."

Phew, so such a complicated system existed in the labyrinth. Just who made this? ...Wait, that sounded weird. Why is there something inside this labyrinth that feels like 'someone has set it up with a concrete purpose'? I stopped walking after hearing my own words, and the other two must have felt my discomfort.

"That's—"

"Don't move, you three!"

Surprised by this loud scream, I looked around, only to see a great number of guards appearing from the shadow of the buildings, surrounding us. Eh, did we do something bad?! Appearing in front of us was a middle-aged man with a stern expression, riding on a military horse. His entire body was clad in silver armor, an expensive-looking sword hanging down his waist, giving off the air of a knight.

"Sir Ox, what is this about?"

"Princess, could you please follow us."

Rufa had readied her wand with a rebellious expression, but the knight calmly responded, and glared over at me.

"The same goes for you. Don't you dare injure the princess or the daughter of Redberyl-dono." He said, putting one hand on the hilt of his sword.

I mean, I wasn't planning on rebelling in any shape or form, but aren't you embarrassed to threaten girls in such a way? When I sent back a gaze with these thoughts in mind, the knight furrowed his eyebrows even further, and the soldiers around us took a step back. Hold on, isn't this almost like I'm the one threatening them?

'That Dark Knight is gonna have a battle with the soldiers!'

'So he really was sending a declaration of war towards the Empire by wearing these clothes?!'

'That jet-black armor sure is cool.'

People started to gather around us, clearly getting the wrong idea about the situation...Also, that young man with the great fashion sense, let's have a talk once this chaos is over!

"Alba-sama, I understand how you feel, but please leave this to me."

"That's right, this is a free country for adventurers, but fighting against a knight will be regarded as a crime."

Rufa and Garnet stopped me as well. Did I really seem that angry? Though I really didn't want to, I was forced to agree, and nodded. Then, Garnet stood on her toes, and whispered in my ear.

"I doubt you realized it, but whenever you get emotional, there's pitch-black aura leaking from your entire body."

Eh, really!? Woah, that's pretty embarrassing then. My teacher even warned me to take keen control of my Aura so that the enemy can't read my movement...Seeing me back down (because of my embarrassment), the soldiers around all sighed in relief, as the knight removed his hand from the sword hilt.

"Come with me."

The knight turned around on the horse, and we followed him, surrounded by the other soldiers. Slowly after, we arrived at the 8th area, which harbors the entrance to the labyrinth, but more specifically barracks for guards and soldiers. We were led through a wide open room that seemed to be resembling a cafeteria, sat down at a table surrounded by city soldiers, with the knight sitting across from us. He took a close gaze at Rufa.

"Now then, you must understand why you have been taken here, right?"

"No, I have no idea whatsoever."

Not backing down at the knight's stern gaze, Rufa gave a resolute response. That's right, we didn't do anything bad!

"Please refrain from playing innocent. You should know that using the forbidden magic 'Alarm' in the labyrinth is a violation of laws."

We actually did something bad?! But, why is it so bad that we used that? In confusion, I looked over at Garnet, but even she couldn't help me.

"Apologies, I'm not too familiar with magic. Though it makes sense that such magic, able to summon large amounts of monsters, would be called a forbidden magic..."

With these words, the two of us gazed over at Rufa, who whistled as she averted her gaze. The knight saw this suspicious reaction, sighed, and gave a quick explanation.

"By using Alarm, you can gather almost all monsters on a single floor. If you have the necessary skill, you can use this to kill a great number of monsters in a short period of timing, making your work highly efficient. But, I don't think I need to tell you what could happen if another adventurer were to get wrapped up in this tsunami."

Ah, I never considered that! What if someone got wrapped up in this and actually died!? I started panicking.

"We went early in the morning so that no accident like this could happen though?"

"Indeed, we have received no reports of anybody dying or injured in this incident."

Hearing the knight's words, I sighed in relief. As if he had guessed my relief, the knight put a bit more force into his words.

"However, that was nothing more than luck this time, and there is no guarantee that nothing will happen the next time!"

Ugh, he's not wrong. There's lots of adventurers who go out to the labyrinth at noon, but there's no guarantee that some early birds might be around.



"However, that is not the biggest problem."

I'm pretty sure it's a big problem though?!

"You lured in all the monsters on a single floor, and monopolized them. That is the biggest problem." The knight turned towards Rufa, and spoke with calm words.

Yeah, that makes sense. I never thought about it before...On the first day I went into the labyrinth, a previous group of adventurers had cleared the floor, leaving almost nothing behind for me. That is probably exactly what we did this morning after killing around 500 monsters, leaving the first floor completely empty.

"We received reports from 1st floor ranker adventurers, saying 'There were no monsters whatsoever', so we figured someone must have been using 'Alarm'."

Judging from that tone, someone in the past must have been doing the same. Well, in this thousand years of history this labyrinth possesses, that's not really a surprise. But, how did they figure out it was us this quickly? I thought that something was off, to which Rufa clicked her tongue.

"From the amount of magic stones we exchanged at the bank, is it."

Ahh, I see. With the type and amount of magic stones, they could figure out just on which floor we've gathered them from. Asking the bank, the knight found out it was us, and surrounded us.

The resourcefulness of his Empire's soldiers sure is amazing, we have to be more careful in the future. The knight looked over at Rufa once again.

"From that reaction, I figure you already knew about the dangers and possible negative effects, and you still used it."

"No, I had absolutely no idea that these actions could possibly bring harm to someone else. I am terribly sorry, I swear to never do it again." Rufa deeply lowered her head.

Was it just my imagination that she didn't seem sincere about it at all? But, now that she has admitted her mistake, I doubt that the knight will complain any further.

"Although the use of Alarm goes against the law, it is an unwritten law in the rows of adventurers, and cannot be punished by law. Now that no victims had originated from this, I cannot punish you."

"Then, we will make our way home." Rufa showed a fresh smile, and stood up.

However, the soldiers around us swiftly blocked off the only exit.

"Sir Ox, what exactly is this about?" With a cold gaze like I've never seen before, Rufa glared at the knight. "Adventurer Law article one, as long as an adventurer has committed no serious crime, his own freedom will be protected...You're not saying that you don't know about that, do you?"

"....."

"Crims regarded as these would be 'Having another person end up as [Lost]' and a 'Rebellious action against the royal family', which cannot be soothed with money nor magic, but instead is regarded as a great crime

with punishment on the level of death penalty. I don't remember us ever committing such a crime?" Rufa spoke with a calm, yet terrifyingly cold and pressuring voice, as the knight stayed quiet.

It's almost as if she's a princess...No, a queen!

"She has the blood of it, even if she doesn't want it." Garnet muttered with a quiet voice.

Blood? What is she talking about? I tilted my head in confusion, when the knight spoke up.

"Princess, or should I say your Highness Rufa Auram Goldot, 7th princess of the Goldot Empire, would you please stop with this idle child's play?"

...Eh, 7th princess?

"Sir Ox, do not refer to me with this name. The me right now is a mere adventurer, the elf sorceress Rufa." Yet, the way she named herself, and her posture as she spoke, resembled like a princess all too much.

She was actually a princess all this time?!

"Way too late..."

I was left baffled, Garnet yet again sighed in disbelief, whereas the knight and Rufa continued to glare at each other.

"This Goldot Empire was built by the very first adventurer, namely the first Emperor. It is a country brought to today's prime by the shed sweat and blood of many other adventurers. That is why, no matter the origin, or race, an adventurer shall never be restrained, no matter the cause."

"Even if it's the princess, is it."

"If you know it, then have these people pull back right away." Rufa turned her chin over at the soldiers blocking the exit.

"Or, are you saying that you will be able to stop Alba-sama?"

Eh, me?! Why did she suddenly involve me?! In shock, I jolted up from my seat. Following this, the knight did the same, drew his blade, and aimed at my neck with it.

Woah, careful! I faced the approaching blade, and reflexively blocked it with my backhand. A metallic sound rang out, and the knight's blade snapped in half.

"Wha...?!"

The knight fell backwards in shock, and the broken blade stabbed right into the wall...Ahhh, damn it, now I really did it...! That sword looked really expensive! Am I going to lose all the 500 gold coins we earned today already?! I was about to collapse from the shock, Garnet supported me.

"Come on, let's go home."

Wait, I at least have to pay him back for the broken sword, you know?! But, my plea was ignored, as Garnet kept pushing me towards the door. The soldiers standing guard there didn't give much resistance, and quickly moved out of the way.

"Then, farewell." Rufa gave a polite bow, and stepped out onto the hallway. At her back, the knight raised his voice, with the harshest tone of the day.

"You expose yourself to danger because of some foolish lie about the Empire falling to ruin, and you do not feel sorry for the Emperor, whose heart is about to break from worry! Are you not ashamed!?"

The Empire is falling to ruin? What is he talking about? I tilted my head, but chased after Rufa nonetheless. She left the barracks without a single word, gazed up at the sky about to be colored in red, as she muttered in a dejected tone.

"That man would never worry about his daughter."

Her profile looked so sad and hurt, I couldn't ask her anything.

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This entire time we walked back to the lodging boulevard, Rufa kept quiet, not saying a word. They invited me into their apartment, guided me to their room, and just when I sat down on the chair, Rufa finally opened her mouth. "Alba-sama, I am terribly sorry about deceiving you." Rufa deeply lowered her head.

Deceiving? Is she talking about her being an actual princess?

"I assume you must already be aware that I am the 7th imperial princess."

Nope, not at all.

"Even though you must be aware that the deepest part of the labyrinth doesn't actually grant you any wish, you kept going along with my selfish behaviour, and I know I can't be forgiven..."

This is the first time I heard of that. Why are you telling me all these things I never heard of? At times like these...Garneeeeet, help meeee!

"Don't act like I'm your mother! Well, I also kept quiet about it, so let me tell you the truth." Garnet sighed, and started explaining. Thank you! That's what I love about you!

"Don't overdo it, or I'll break your neck."

I meant to purely praise her, and yet she clicked her tongue in an annoyed manner, picking up her mace. Weird...my childhood friend's mood would improve immediately whenever I said something like this.

"You airheaded gigolo..."

"Garnet, what have you been talking about for a while now?"

"That you both are idiots. Just shut up and listen already." Garnet landed a jab on Rufa's head, who showed slight confusion, and finally started explaining. "First, as you should know, there's a rumour that if you make it to the lowest floor of the labyrinth, namely the 7th, a wish of yours will be granted, no matter what it may be."

It ends with seven floors, and yet they call it the bottomless labyrinth? Isn't that a bit of a hyperbole?

"Don't just add more questions! Anyway, this rumour exists, and results in countless adventurers trying to reach this last floor. However, the truth is different."

"On the last floor, the 'Devil of Demise', able to bring ruin to the world, has been sealed away."

Rufa finished Garnet's words, with a tense voice...The Devil of Demise... Gaah, what a cool name! Wait, this isn't the time to have my childish heart tickled. Isn't this a big problem?!

"That's great, a super big problem. However, out of all the 200.000 citizens in this capital, not one of them knows about this."

Really? Then again, only a few seconds ago, I thought that I would actually have my own wish granted, so this feeling of reality hasn't quite set in just yet. But, on my way here to the capital, I did not once hear of anything resembling that. If anything, I would have remembered such a cool-sounding name.

If such a cool existence—excuse me, terrifying existence really lingered at the bottom of his labyrinth, I feel like Gramps or Grandma would have told me about that when I departed...Seeing me tilt my head, Rufa continued with a saddened tone.

"I know that it might be hard to believe. I have talked to several people about this, but only Garnet was kind enough to believe me."

"No way would such a rotten idiotic princess come up with such a stupid idea." Garnet gently rubbed her hand on the softly smiling Rufa.

Of course, I don't doubt these two and such a heartwarming scene in the slightest. What I am concerned about is the possibility that these two might have gotten some fake information. Of course, Garnet had picked up on this uneasiness of mine, and responded to it.

"No need to worry, we have proper proof. Though nobody actually believed us."

Hmm, I wonder what that is.

"It started two years ago, when this girl snuck into the library of the imperial palace."

"Excuse me, at least say that I borrowed a book for all eternity."

Isn't that what you would call theft?

"The only reason she stole it was to get back at her older sisters, so she even laid hands on the sealed forbidden book storage."

"I can't hear you~" Rufa just covered her ears, humming to herself.

I know that she was acting childish, but since I was used to this already, it looked more cute than anything. Picking up on my gaze, Rufa blushed ever so slightly, and cleared her throat.

"Cough...Anyway, this book that I found in this book storage told about a history long past. Namely, it depicted a time a thousand years ago and more, before the Goldot Empire even came into existence."

Isn't that basically back during the ancient myths?! I jolted forwards in shock, and Garnet nodded.

"Indeed. During the era when gods and monsters still traversed the earth, the weak human race was driven on the verge of extinction, just fighting to see another day."

"The benevolent gods couldn't keep watching it, defeated the evil god that brought forth all these monsters, and created a safe world for us to live in. You must know these stories as well, Alba-sama."

Yeah, I heard something similar from Gramps. I guess the small differing details are just a regional thing.

"After that, humans could comfortably live above ground, and grew in numbers. A single young man found the bottomless labyrinth, gained a new strength after having defeated the monsters residing in it, and became the first emperor of the Goldot Empire. That is the general history that is being taught."

"But, in the book Rufa found, it's being told differently."

Huh, I wonder what that is.

"This evil god that can create monsters—The Devil Of Demise wasn't actually defeated, but was instead sealed deep underground. A thousand years later, he will come back to life, and destroy the world for sure this time. That's what it said."

E-Excuse me?! I desperately held back a desire to scream. I can't bother the neighbours and give Rufa and Garnet a bad impression.

"Our impression on others is already the worst, so let's talk about this Devil of Demise some more. Do you really think such an evil god really exists?"

...Eh, he doesn't?

"Why do you seem so disappointed about that?"

I mean, it's the Devil of Demise, you know? The name sounds so friggin cool! I bet he has jet-black armor, looking like a Hecatoncheires<sup>2</sup>, a cursed sword that has killed over 100 races, swinging around ancient magic that can destroy the whole world!

"Your imagination is on an entirely different level I see." Garnet gave me a lukewarm gaze.

I guess a girl wouldn't understand the romance of a man?

"Instead of being afraid of the Devil, you are more excited than ever I see. That's Alba-sama for you." At the same time, Rufa seemed to have gotten the wrong idea about something.

I mean, I love the way he sounds, and I'd die to see him in action, but having him destroy the world and me actually dying in the process is something even I have to refrain from. So, does this Devil of Demise actually exist or not?

"He doesn't—is the normal answer. If it was me, I'd shake it off with a snort. However, the forbidden book Rufa found has actual proof."

I swallowed my breath, waiting to hear of this proof. Rufa pointed at the ground, and answered.

"It's the bottomless labyrinth. At its final floor, the Devil of Demise has been sealed."

"Wha?!" Finally, I couldn't hold back my surprise.

The Devil is sealed away at the depths of the labyrinth...Ugh, it sounds so cool it's unfair!

"I'm not gonna retort on that anymore, okay. Also, it might be the proof, but don't you think that the labyrinth is a weird place in itself?"

Garnet was right. The very existence of the labyrinth is questionable. How did the labyrinth even come into existence? There's no way these beautiful stone floors just appeared out of nowhere, and this teleport circle where you need the medal of a Guardian, this reeks of human engineering.

But, creating such a gigantic underground labyrinth just with human power seems difficult to pull off, and automatically summoning hundreds of monsters each day feels like something out of reach for human magic. The labyrinth was created by someone. But, humans were nearly not powerful enough, which means—

"An evil god could create such a bottomless labyrinth."

"Indeed." Rufa nodded in satisfaction at my response.

"The sealed Devil brought forth the monsters as vanguards to invade the surface, which created this labyrinth."

I see...Wait. But, why is there a need for the labyrinth if it's just sending up monsters? Garnet and Rufa apparently had a similar doubt, which is why they took a bit to respond.

"The Devil created a straight path, but the benevolent Gods saw this, and must have changed it into a twisted labyrinth. So that the monsters can't make it above ground."

Yeah, that makes much more sense.

"Of course, I don't believe everything in this forbidden book to be true.

There are a lot of contradictions and unclear statements."

Now that she says it, this might just be something artificially created.

"However, if this Devil of Demise, or an existence equally dangerous, were to be sealed on the deepest floor of the labyrinth, then I think it should be fine to at least put some faith in the fact that it might be resurrected after a thousand years." Rufa said, opening a scroll. "This forbidden book storage had even more important and very interesting information concerning the labyrinth. This is one part of it."

Let's see...the total number of monsters making frequent appearances on the first floor?

"Especially about these past one hundred years, the growing amount of adventurers correlates with the growth of the Empire, and there have been several times when the amount of monsters hunted on the first floor have become zero."

"But, that's only the case once a month at best. A normal adventurer only makes his way every two, three days, and there's those that only go once a week."

I see, so there's days where the amount of adventurers overlaps to a level that they hunt all the monsters.

"An investigation team of the Empire was formed to use this day as a chance, and calculated the monsters making frequent appearances on the first floor."

Just like the knight had concluded our crime, they must have used the amount of magic stones brought to the bank to calculate it. Since there's times where weak monsters like kobolds don't drop magic stones at all, getting a truthful value is probably impossible, but if you go ask the adventurers, you should get a fairly accurate number.

"Three years ago, during the most recent investigation, there were around 490 monsters."

Since we defeated around 500 that day, it should be fairly accurate.

"50 years ago, the investigation came to around 470."

Eh, it's gone down in number?

"One hundred years ago during the very first investigation, it was around 430 monsters."

So it's really going down in number...No, wait, the closer the year to the current one, the higher the number?! Utterly shocked, I looked up from the scroll, and met eyes with Rufa.

"Anything before this, we sadly have no way to confirm it, but according to our experience today, there were around 500 monsters, so there's no mistaking it. The number of monsters appearing in the labyrinth are gradually rising."

I see, so the reason we used the forbidden Alarm skill today wasn't just to raise our Aura, but also to investigate the amount of monsters!

"I wonder about that." Garnet complained.

"Of course, it was all part of my plan." Rufa said, looking the other way.

"Why would you avert your gaze then?"

"A-Anyway, since the number of monsters is going up inside the labyrinth, we can assume that the strength sealing the Devil is starting to weaken."

"And, even if this Devil doesn't exist, the sheer fact that the amount of monsters is growing is enough of a problem. If they start making it to the surface and attack the town, this will end as a disaster."

Imagining an amount of monsters the adventurers can't handle ravaging through town, I felt a shiver.

"In that event, the capital will get destroyed without a doubt. And, knowing of this, the other countries won't hold back from invading the Empire." Rufa denounced with a cold tone.

...Yeah, that makes sense. The countries that had lost in the war against the Empire surely are filled with hatred. I highly doubt another country would come to help the Empire in the event of a monster invasion.

"On top of that, they don't even think about the idea that their country might be next to be attacked by monsters. That's just how humans work."

"After finding out about this truth, I couldn't sit still any longer."

While being a princess—No, exactly because she is one, she felt the need to do something about this Devil of Demise that was threatening the inhabitants of her beloved capital.

"I first appealed to the Emperor—My shitty old man. But, he wouldn't listen to me at all."

I know it must be tough, but was there really a need to rephrase that.  
“I tried seeking for help from other cabinet ministers or the generals, but their grudges directed at my beauty and race led them to just ignore me as well. Nobody vowed to help me.”

Even though they’re blood-related, just because of a different race, she’s being scorned by her siblings...Scary.

“You’re not going to report on the fact of her calling herself a beauty?”  
Garnet muttered.

“It’s the truth.”

“Oh my, please praise me more.” Rufa smiled happily, her cheeks blushing. As always, she looked cute, especially with that gesture, but at the same time, it feels like an act.

“So you’ve finally grasped that idiot princess’ real identity.” Garnet fought hard to hold back the tears, as she tapped me on the back.

I’m sure that she normally puts on the mask of a perfect princess, with her close friend Garnet the only one knowing about what she really is like. In other words, she has nobody else where she can open her heart. I guess that the imperial palace must have been much darker of a world than it leads to be believed from the outside.

“Anyways, nobody inside the castle has opted to act. That is why I decided to defeat the Devil of Demise myself.”

That is how she ended up as an adventurer, and challenged the labyrinth, huh. What amazing driving force and sense of duty. It makes me feel pathetic for just wanting to build my own home.

“However, motivation alone doesn’t give me the strength necessary. I cannot do this on my own.”

It pains me to say it, but that is the truth. Even if Rufa’s Aura leveled up quite a bit through the use of Alarm today, she still can’t hope to win against the proprietress of the Eternal Lady, nor the samurai girl Chidori-san.

“Sadly, there is no time to calmly strengthen ourselves, because only one year is left until the revival of the Devil of Demise.”

I see, so we have another year left...Wait, one year?! T-That’s too fast. We haven’t even prepared yet...

“We humans had more than a thousand years to prepare for our battle with the Devil of Demise. However, we wasted all of that.”

Not knowing anything is not a valid excuse. There’s no way the Devil of Demise would just listen to that and when he gets resurrected.

“There is also the possibility that nothing will actually happen. However, rather than standing in front of 200.000 dead bodies, I don’t mind being ridiculed now.” Rufa announced, gazing straight at me. “Alba-sama, I don’t expect you to forgive me for lying to you. However, in order to save the citizens of this capital, I need your strength!”

“Alright, I’ll do it.”



"If that helps in conceiving you, I don't mind doing whatever you want me to—Eh?"

"I will help you."

Since it was very important, I repeated my affirmation, which left Rufa baffled for some reason. Maybe I didn't express myself well enough?

"I will defeat the Devil of Demise."

That should have been clear enough, right? I spoke with full confidence, but Rufa was still quiet, gazing at me like I was the devil himself.

"...Why?"

What do you mean why? Hearing about the destruction of the capital, and the entire world in the process, how could I not agree to help out? If anything, I'm shocked nobody ever believed Rufa after all the proof she's gathered.

"Not a single person has made it to the last floor of the bottomless labyrinth in the last thousand years. Are you still willing to do it?" Garnet asked, her gaze going from relief to seriousness again.

"Yeah."

"Even if we make it down there, we have no guarantee that we can actually defeat that Devil. Are you still going to try?" Garnet continued.

"Yeah." I nodded without hesitation.

I don't have any confidence in myself, and my chances of winning, but that's the best I can offer as of right now. And, in addition to that...

"I want to be the owner of my own home."

"Eh..."

"And I don't plan on giving up on that." I proudly declared.

Compared to Rufa's grande goal, it is probably just a grain of sand on the wide beach of dreams, but I think that giving up on your own goals is just pathetic. Chasing after a dream no matter how fragile it is makes you a man after all!

"You really are a moron."

I showed a fist with an arrogant grin (behind my mask), to which Garnet gave me a dubious gaze. But, oddly enough, it felt like her eyes were smiling at me. Worried, I glanced over at Rufa, whose eyes were wide open, tears running down her face.

"Alba-sama, please defeat the Devil of Demise, and earn yourself the Goldot Empire." She said, and lowered her head.

I mean, I'm fine with an average house, I don't need an entire country.

\*

When Alba went back to his own room, Garnet and Rufa were left alone.

"Fufufu, I've finally managed to completely win over Alba-sama with my perfect acting." Rufa started laughing to herself.

"You can drop the act, okay."

She might try to make her sound like a wicked woman, but with tears of joy building up in her eyes, and her face beet red, that was all wasted.

"I mean, he's the first person to actually believe in your words, and even offered to lend a helping hand, so I don't blame you if you were to fall for him."

"N-Nobody is falling for anybody! Also, going by that logic, shouldn't you have fallen for him way before me!?"

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop spitting disgusting nonsense!" Garnet gave an angered scream, which continued into a sigh. "Well, it's up to you, and not my place to judge."

"Is that not a bit too heartless?"

"Leaving that aside, Alba has promised to help us even after learning the truth. We should probably aim to defeat the Guardian tomorrow, so that we can head to a deeper floor."

When Garnet cut into the main topic, Rufa herself sat straight on the bed, her face tightening up.

"Yes, thanks to Alba-sama's help, our Aura has grown significantly stronger, and we don't have any time to waste. We should definitely aim to defeat the 'Indolent Sloth'. However..."

"Are you worried?"

Rufa nodded.

"Sloth has been defeated countless times by adventurers, so everybody knows to deal with it."

"That sounds a bit sad, doesn't it."

Garnet doubted that this monster had any fear of death, seeing that it was being killed on a daily basis, but she still couldn't help feel bad for it.

"On top of that, seeing that Alba-sama holds the strength comparable to a 6th floor ranker, there is no way that he would lose against the Guardian of the first floor. But, the recommended number to defeat Sloth is more than eight people..."

Seeing that they were only three people, it couldn't be helped that Rufa ended up worried. Of course, a 6th floor ranker is much stronger than ten 1st floor rankers. However, even if he has allies to fight against a paralysis attack, Alba can die just as easily. As with the Guardian of the first floor, 'Indolent Sloth', he is known to be a 'Loner Killer'.

"What if I just use my shield to block off his eyes, you stay behind with magic, and Alba attacks during the openings?"

"I don't think it will be a big problem. But, I'd still prefer another two or three meat shields."

"Can you not call them like that?"

"It is the truth, so I can't help it." Rufa didn't even bother to choose her words, and instead sighed. "Why can't there be any good meat shields around."

"I'm honestly shocked you didn't find anybody yet with that attitude."

Then again, seeing that their party consisted of a fallen princess and a fake Dark Knight, Garnet was dubious if you could even pay somebody to join their party.

After complaining for a few more minutes, Rufa eventually grew tired, and went to bed. The next morning...

"You are the team member of the Dark Knight-sama, right? Please treat me well from today on!"

"Please treat us well!"

Three unfamiliar beauties appeared together with Alba.

"...Huh?"

"...Welp, good for you, I guess." Garnet gave a sarcastic comment, whereas Rufa was at a loss for words.

1 [Sloth] written as White horned bear

2 Giants in Greek mythology with 100 arms and 50 heads

## Chapter 3: The Evil of Sloth

Leaving the apartment of Rufa and Garnet, I headed to the Eternal Maiden as the streets were enwrapped in darkness. At the same time, I felt my heartbeat accelerating.

"The Devil of Demise, sealed inside the labyrinth to avoid the destruction of the world..." I know that I may sound imprudent, but I can't help admiring the sound of it.

And, defeating a Devil to save the world, how can I not get excited at this! Fighting for my own sake isn't half bad, but trying hard to save the people in this world, it just sounds so cool. It's like a Hero of the old legends that I always admired!

"...I should calm down." I realized myself I was getting a bit too excited, so I stopped in my tracks, taking a deep breath.

If what Rufa said is true, then the Devil of Demise will resurrect, and destroy this Empire. This truly isn't the time to get excited about the idea of becoming a hero.

"For now, we have to make it to the lowest floor of the bottomless labyrinth."

Once we find this Devil of Demise, the people who disregarded Rufa's pleas will surely give their assistance as well. Even if the three of us can't win ourselves, the adventurers and soldiers of the Empire combined might be able to do it. The time limit of one year is pretty tough, but it's too early to despair.

"Yeah, I can see hope."

I raised my head with more motivation than ever, and hurried my way home to get a good wink of sleep.

"Kyaaa!"

I heard a scream coming from a deep alley, making me stop on my feet.

"What?"

I ran towards the origins of the source, finding a single young girl with three dangerous-looking men surrounding her.

"He he he, don't be like that."

"We'll take good care of you, so just stay calm."

"N-No, let go!"

The men grabbed the arm of the girl, desperately trying to resist. Is this an abduction incident?! I thought things like these weren't happening because

of the red light district here, but the capital is a scary place...Wait, aren't these the three men that were scared away by the bar employee!?

"Some shit happened, and I'm in a bad mood now. If you don't listen to me, I might have to hurt your cute face, you know?"

"Eeek...!"

The leader of the group showed a fist, threatening the girl. Said fist was wrapped in bandages, so it must be the man. He really didn't learn at all from his misstep yesterday. I can't forgive that. You're lowering the evaluation of people that came here from a rural area!

"Wait a second." Filled with rage, I set foot in the back alley. "Let go of her."

"Huh? What's your problem, pu—Eek, a-a demon?!"

The men turned around, saw my black armor, and immediately showed a terrified expression. To think that being feared by people all the time would come in handy here...Filled with complicated feelings, I put my hand on the greatsword at my back.

"Leave."

Only muttering this one word, I let free a great amount of black aura from my body. It's fairly useful against bugs and flies during the summer, but apparently it had a great effect on humans as well. The men were shaking in their boots, quickly releasing the girl, and ran away.

"S-Shit, you better remember this!"

I didn't think I'd hear the same phrase two times on a single day like this. Maybe I should report this incident to the town soldiers? But, will that knight really believe me after what happened before...Lost on what to do, I was taken by surprise when the girl suddenly jumped into my chest.

"Thank you very much, Dark Knight-sama. If you hadn't passed by, then..."

The girl broke out in tears, her body shaking.

No, I'm sorry for my fellow people, who caused trouble yet again. As a token of apology, I gently rubbed her back until she stopped crying, and separated my body.

"Then..."

"Please wait a moment!" The girl frantically clung to my arm.

I turned around in surprise, and was met with her dampened gaze, as if she was trying to appeal to me.

"Dark Knight-sama, please become our team member!"

...Now that sounds oddly familiar. Is it becoming a new fad? I tilted my head in confusion, when the girl let go of my hand, looking scared.

"Ah, I'm sorry! But, could you maybe at least hear me out!"

Her dampened eyes reminded me of Rufa back then. I wonder why. I got a really bad feeling about this, but turning her down right here would make me feel horrible all the same...

"I understand."

"Really!? Thank you very much!"

I nodded, which let the girl's face light up in joy, as she grabbed my hand, and we started walking. I was taken to a cheap-looking residence located in a back alley. Two other girls were inside the room, looking shocked at my appearance, but nodded in agreement after hearing the circumstances.

"First, I'd like to introduce ourselves. I am the leader and hunter Eclair."

"I am the priest Jam."

"And I'm a warrior monk, Cracker."

They all had names related to sweets, something I haven't heard before. Maybe they came from a location that's famous for their sweets? As I was thinking about something unnecessary, the hunter Eclair-san started the conversation as the representative.

"In order to save our village that's been in danger because of the drought, we became adventurers and came to the capital."

Woah, that's some noble cause.

"It was a lot of work and exceptionally tough at times, but we managed to graduate from the training grounds."

I felt my chest ache, knowing that I never even went there in the first place.

"However, we couldn't find someone that would form a group with people from the countryside like us..."

Please, stop, that makes me remember some tough times myself!

"We worked hard as the three of us, but haven't made any progress inside the labyrinth. Without earning any money, at this rate..."

She must have remembered the situation back at their home village, as Eclair-san and the others all started to ear up.

"That's why, Dark Knight-sama, please become our team member, and help us!"

"If you agree to do so, then..."

The girls said, removing the buttons of their clothes, flipping up their skirts to show their thighs. I thought only elves liked to undress like this? Is this yet another trend becoming more popular? I think you should do that when there's no men around.

I grabbed Eclair-san's hand to make her stop, and nodded.

"Understood."

"This is what happened, and now we're team members with the Dark Knight-sama!" Eclair-san declared, clinging to my arm.

She took the role of explaining the circumstances to Rufa and Garnet, seeing that I'm not exactly talkative, but I don't like the way she's clinging at me.

"With this being the case, please treat us well!"

"....."

Eclair-san gave another energetic smile, but Rufa just stood frozen, expressionless. Maybe she's angry that I selfishly invited these girls after all...But, as fellow people who came from the same kind of place as me, I couldn't leave them alone. And, I thought the more people we had to challenge the labyrinth, the better...

Rufa stood frozen still, as Garnet was the one to open her mouth.

"Let me just make sure, but do you understand just who this elf here is?"

"Yes, she is the 7th imperial princess, isn't she."

"You'll be travelling with her. Are you aware of what the royal family might do?"

"As long as we have Dark Knight-sama, we aren't scared of anything."

"Our goal is to make it to the bottom floor of the labyrinth, what about that?"

"He saved me, and offered a helping hand in our time of need. We will follow him to the pits of hell." Eclair-san answered Garnet's questions without hesitation.

"That's what she says, but what about you?" Garnet directed her gaze at Rufa, who suddenly flashed a smile.

"I understand the circumstances. To save your hometown, I will do my utmost to help." She said, and shook hands with Eclair-san and the others.

Thank god. I knew that Rufa probably wasn't going to reject them, but it seems like she's not forcing herself. I sighed in relief, when Rufa declared.

"Now then, **Dark Knight-sama**, let us head to the labyrinth, shall we."

Huh? I feel like her way of addressing me changed...I gazed over at Garnet to seek for help, who just shook her head.

"You really are a groundbreaking moron."

She's insulting me!?

"The more kind you are, the more poison you'll swallow...Well, since you're helping us, I don't have any room to complain." Garnet commented as she passed by me, walking on ahead with Rufa.

Maybe she really was angry after all...?

"Dark Knight-sama, let's head on as well."

I wasn't given any time, as Eclair-san pulled on my arm, and we headed towards the labyrinth.

\*

"Today, we're heading to the first floor of the labyrinth to defeat the Guardian [Indolent Sloth]."

We entered the labyrinth early in the morning with no other person around, as Rufa announced this, handing out a parchment. There, she had marked down the layout of the first floor, as she pointed at a big room a straight path from the entrance.

"This is where Sloth is residing. Once you enter the room, you cannot leave again nor have someone enter it without fully defeating the Guardian, so please be mindful of that."

Though this allows for no interruptions during the fight, it means that there's no way of escaping.

"Dark Knight-sama, I'm scared..." Eclair-san clung to me as she shook, so I gently tapped her shoulder.

**Crunch!**

"Then, let us go ahead." Rufa crushed the map in her hand, and started walking.

I figured, she must be angry. But, how do I apologize? Whenever I was having a fight with my childhood friend, Gramps would tell me to 'Just keep quiet and act like you're listening to them'! I walked next to Rufa, and decided to hear her out.

"....."

"....."

This doesn't really help if the other person doesn't listen at all!? Ugh, now that it's come to this...Garnet~ Help me~!

—Again, don't just rely on me!

She just glared at me. This is done for...It's over...I dropped my shoulders in despair, when Eclair-san and the others showed worried gazes.

"Dark Knight-sama, what happened?"

"If you feel off, you can go and fondle my chest a bit?"

"You can have my butt if need be?"

The only person that would cheer up with that is Gramps!

"...Ptui."

For some reason, I felt like I heard Rufa spit on the ground, but I'm too scared to check. In the midst of this awkward atmosphere, we moved along the path, when—

"Careful!"

At the third intersection we arrived at, I started dashing forwards, carrying Rufa and Garnet in my arms as I jumped up.

"Alba-sama!?"

"What are you doing!?"

At the location the two stood at a second ago, a transparent flabby lifeform dropped on the floor.

"A slime!?"

Rufa raised a shriek, and even I was shocked. Because we both thought that the 1st floor of the labyrinth only harbored human-type enemies like goblins or trolls. Maybe the slow movement speed of the slimes made it so that they rarely appeared on this 1st floor? Either way, the bottomless labyrinth is a place where you can't let down your guard even once.

I let down Rufa and Garnet, and slowly pulled the greatsword at my back. In response, the slime tried to leap at me, but I cleaved it in two.

—My chance for a fanservice sceneeeee!

I felt like I heard an agonizing death scream coming from the slime, but it quickly dispersed into light, and disappeared. As for a magic stone...Nope, none.

"Alba-sama, um, thank—"

"Kyaaa, Dark Knight-sama!"

The second Rufa tried to say something, Eclair-san and the others raised words of praise and jumped at me.



"You anticipated the attack of the slime, and even defeated it in one attack, you're amazing!"

"Wonderful, I'm falling for you!"

I'm happy about them praising me like this, but it really wasn't anything great...If anything, I felt apologetic, and carefully pushed away the others. And then, I directed my gaze over at Rufa, who was previously interrupted—"...Dark Knight-sama, I humbly thank you for the rescue. Now, let us move on." She thanked me like we were complete strangers, and walked on ahead.

Ugh...even though she calmed me by name before...As I was left depressed, Garnet gave me a hand sign.

—You saved me there, thanks.

You don't have to worry about that, we're teammates.

—If only that idiot princess was as simple as you.

What do you mean?

—Anyway, just leave Rufa to me.

Thanks, Mom!

—Go. Die!

Oh come on, I was saying that as a compliment...I was depressed yet again, when Garnet lined up next to Rufa. They started talking about something I couldn't pick up on, but as long as her mood gets better, I'm totally fine with that. Not too long after that, we finally made it to the room of the Guardian.

"So here will be the Indolent Sloth..."

Standing in front of a metal and sturdy door, Eclair-san and the others swallowed their breaths. Rufa equally had a tensed-up expression, as she exchanged glances with the others.

"Let us confirm our plan of operations once again. Garnet and Cracker-san will step in front, and gather the attention of Sloth. In the event that they get hurt, Jam-san will provide heals, whereas Eclair-san and I will deliver long-range attacks, diverting its attention." Speaking this far, Rufa finally looked me in the eyes. "Once we've managed to create an opening, you deliver the finishing blow, Alba-sama."

"Yeah!" I nodded with momentum.

Since she called me by my name, her mood must have improved drastically. To make up for my previous mistake, I'll use my secret Black Shadow Style's sword magic, and defeat him in one strike!

"Make sure not to destroy the labyrinth, will ya." Garnet tapped on my waist with a wry smile.

Right as I put my hand on the big door, Eclair-san screamed.

"Dark Knight-sama, please wait a moment! The blade of your greatsword is chipped!"

Eh, no way!? In shock, I took a closer look at my greatsword—My 'Demon Eater'. It can eat up the magical power in the surroundings, and fire it off in

a different way, so even if it was chipped a bit, it shouldn't hurt, but...maybe it happened during my battle with the slime?

"Lend it to me for a second."

I grew worried, when Eclair-san reached for the hilt of the sword. She accepted it, and managed to easily carry it with her right hand.

"Eh!?" Rufa raised a shock-filled voice.

Is this really something to be surprised about? Judging Eclair-san's real strength—

**Push!**

"...Eh?" This time, I was the one making a dumbfounded noise.

Eclair-san faced my chest, and pushed my body with her shoulder. Left in surprise, I couldn't regain my balance, and bumped against the door—or so I expected, but I actually stepped inside the room.

"...Eh?" Another surprised voice escaped my mouth.

Cracker-san and Jam-san had actually opened the door while we weren't looking. And, with a different smile from usual, as if they were looking at their prey, their gazes filled with lust, they closed the door.

"...Eh?" That was the third time.

No seriously, I had no idea what just happened. Excuse me!? I panicky tried to open the door, but it didn't move an inch, as if 'Time Stop' had been cast on it. And then...

"Gugoooooooo!"

I heard the ear-splitting howl of a wild beast at my back.

\*

"Excuse me, what is this—"

"Don't move."

Alba had been locked inside the Guardian's room, and when Rufa tried to protest, Eclair pointed the crimson red greatsword at her.

"Bastard!"

"You stay still as well."

Garnet readied her mace to fight back, but the other two girls intercepted her, like a group of predators surrounding their prey. Seeing this, Rufa clicked her tongue as a cold sweat ran down her back.

"Tch, so you weren't just parasites, but actual robbers."

"That's the genius elf princess for you, you catch on quickly even in a situation like this."

Unlike her previous attitude, Eclair responded with a sharp voice, as the corners of her mouth went up to form a grin.

"The Dark Knight-sama's equipment is actually just a bonus. Our real target was you, princess."

"What did you say!?"

Were they spies from another country to abduct the princess and request high sums of ransom? Eclair apparently guessed that thought of Rufa, as she grinned, shaking her head.

"That's an interesting idea, but not quite. Rather than being spies of another country, we're actually the ones hunting them."

"No way that—Well, I guess people like that exist." Rufa stopped herself mid-sentence to fix her words.

Being the 7th imperial princess, she wasn't entirely involved with politics, but with a country as large as the Goldot Empire, it makes sense that they would have to put up defenses against harmful people inside the country. And, since the Empire accepts adventurers disregarding origin and race, that in itself is a wide weakness.

"You secretly take care of enemy spies that snuck in the country as adventurers, so something like an assassination squad?"

"Correct! That's the daughter of the current Emperor."

"Tch."

Eclair let out a snicker as she lowered the blade of the greatsword, which led Rufa to return a click of her tongue.

"An assassination squad like yours has that much free time that you follow the orders of my shitty old man to bring me back?" Returning as much cynicism as possible, Rufa glared at Eclair.

"Almost, you're about 50% there. We're actually just the grunts. We don't get direct orders from the Emperor, and just taking you back isn't our original goal."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you can just ask the person in question for that." Eclair said, and pointed at the path they passed a few minutes prior.

They must be observing this situation from the shadows, no doubt. But, no longer, as a knight in white armor appeared in front of Rufa.

"Sir Ox, so you set this up!"

"It is all for your sake." The knight called Ox spoke with a calm down, even in the face of Rufa's fierce glare. "Give up on defeating this Devil of Demise, and calmly return to being a princess."

"You set up a trap for Alba-sama just to make me understand that!?" Rufa raised a harsh voice, pointing at the metal door.

Past this door, Alba stood all alone, most likely fighting the Guardian. Even if he possessed the strength of a 6th floor ranker, now that his weapon had been stolen, even he should have no hope of defeating Sloth.

"I don't care if this is for the sake of the Empire! At least only aim for me!"

Rufa screamed, as tears formed in her eyes. "Leaving aside Garnet, Alba-sama carries no sin!"

"Excuse me, I don't remember doing anything bad here!?"

"You assisted the escape of the 7th imperial princess."

"Ugh...I guess I did..." Garnet grit her teeth at the sharp argument Rufa made.

In the face of this banter, Ox did not relax his expression once.

"You seem to be in the wrong about something here. Our goal incorporated the idea of dealing with this Dark Knight."

"What! Did you already figure out that Alba-sama aimed to become the next Emperor!?"

"Oho, so he was even more dangerous than we thought." A glimmer of surprise reflected on Ox's expression.

"Don't just add more false information!"

"You keep quiet for a moment."

Garnet raised a scream, but the warrior monk and priest immediately turned their weapons towards her. Rufa watched this, as a doubt came up.

"You didn't know about his plans? Then, why is there a need to kill Alba-sama?"

He can't be found guilty of any sin merely for the fact that he is wearing the armor of the 6th floor's guardian, the Dark Knight.

"Alba-sama has never killed a single person, and even if he planned to take the throne, he has not put that plan into action yet."

At this rate, Alba will really be treated as a traitor—is what Garnet thought to herself, but Rufa continued.

"More than anything, Alba-sama has sworn to defeat the Devil of Demise! Don't you feel ashamed to plot and kill such a kind person!" She raised an angered voice like never before, showing how hurt she must be.

However, Ox showed no hesitation, and returned a calm voice.

"Princess, that exactly is his sin."

"What?"

"This Devil of Demie had been locked away on the final floor of the bottomless labyrinth, but if he was defeated, that would be the biggest problem."

Rufa's expression distorted in shock.

"You believe in the Devil!?"

"Indeed. Not just me, but also the Emperor, a long time time before you even brought it up."

"Why..."

No matter how much she pleaded in front of them, nobody dared to lend her an ear, and now they were supposed to have known from the start? Utterly confused, Rufa could only listen to Ox's next words.

"You cannot be blamed for not knowing. This information written down in the forbidden book was something the first Emperor had left behind."

"The first Emperor!?"

"Concerning the endless supply of monsters, and the mysterious construction of the labyrinth, that was the result of the Devil's power, or so have judged many people hundreds of years ago."

"Wha..."

"The reason we have led an investigation on the number of monsters was because we believed in the existence of the Devil in the first place."

"....." Rufa couldn't force out any words.

All that she had deduced from this forbidden book was already an established fact. No, that didn't matter. If someone like her could arrive at

this, then the countless geniuses before her must have had no trouble. But, that still left one question open.

"We are talking about the Devil of Demise, who will eventually bring ruin to this world, you know? And at the very least, it will utterly destroy the Empire. You believe in its existence, yet order the murder of Alba-sama, who has sworn to assist in fighting this evil!?"

What reason is there to trap and kill an ally? And it's not like he arbitrarily kept Rufa prisoner from returning home. There could have been a means of negotiating. But, Ox just shook his head, tired.

"You have a fundamental misunderstanding, Princess. Defeating the Devil would be a problem for us."

"Huh?" A dumbfounded voice leaked out of Rufa's mouth. "Could you keep the jest for later? How would saving the Empire's—No, the entire world from the Devil of Demise be a problem? Are you a follower of the Devil or something?"

"...Princess, what do you think would happen with the labyrinth if the Devil were to be defeated?"

"The monsters would disappear, and peace would be guaranteed." Rufa didn't even hesitate to answer.

Hearing this, Garnet was the first to realize.

"I see, that's what this is about..."

"Hold on, don't just consent to it all on your own. This makes me feel like I'm the only idiot here!?"

"That's right, you're too gullible of an idiot." Garnet sent Rufa a tragic gaze. While being the 7th imperial princess, and born as an elf, she received hate from her sisters and the other royal family, raised in an environment where you would naturally come to hate people, and yet she threw away her easy life to save the citizens of the capital, and became an adventurer. Even if she can be a plotting witch at times, she is probably as kind and gullible as Alba. That's why she can't catch on to the desires people can harbor.

"Think about it. If monsters disappear, you won't ever be able to gather magic stones again."

"Huh?"

"And it's not just that. If monsters disappear, the adventurers, who have continued to strengthen their Aura, will lose all value." Garnet hissed, as she glared up at Ox.

By doing so, Ox nodded in admiration.

"That is the trusted ally and daughter of Redberyl-sama for you. Unlike your appearance, you are quite reliable."

"You didn't need to add that last part!"

Ox didn't lend an ear to Garnet's roar of anger, and just returned his gaze back to the baffled Rufa.

“As you have said, this Goldot Empire has been built upon the labor of the adventurers. That is why, if the monsters disappear from the labyrinth, the adventurers will disappear, and the Empire will rot.”

“That’s...” Rufa must have grasped it as well now.

The reason the Goldot Empire’s hegemonial family has gained such an influence was because of the endless supply of monsters and magical powers. Magical casts like ‘Fireball’ are born from magic stones, allowing the soldiers of the Empire additional firepower, distinguishing them from soldiers elsewhere. And, you can’t forget about the Aura of adventurers that can best more than a thousand soldiers alone. It is so powerful that it can inflict damage on the one who struck first.

Even an average adventurer on the level of a 1st floor ranker can best up to 50 average soldiers. If you have the power of a 6th floor ranker, you might be able to even destroy smaller countries, which led the Empire to rise to its current power. That however brings up the question of what would happen if the Devil of Demise were defeated, and the vanishing of the labyrinth as a result.

They might be able to keep their status as long as the current generation of adventurers is still alive, but after that, the flames of war would surely erupt. Even the Ring Walls of the capital won’t hold a continuous siege, which will eventually close the curtains on the thousand-year long existence of the Empire.

“Do you finally understand it? The Devil of Demise cannot be defeated or the Empire will fall to ruin.”

“However, won’t the same thing happen in one year, once the Devil is resurrected!?”

Be it the monsters of the Devil of Demise, or the rebellion of the other countries, everything will be too late in one year. But, concerning the rebellion, something can still be done about this. Make peace with the other countries, allow them a certain level of automated authority, and pour water on the sparks of rebellion before it is too late. By doing so, the Empire should not fall to complete ruin, even if the Devil of Demise were to be defeated.

At the same time, if the Devil of Demise were to be resurrected, not only the Empire would fall into ruin, but also the entire world.

“Between the hegemony of the Empire and the lives of humanity, I don’t think you need me to tell you the answer!” Rufa screamed, using logic even a child would understand.

However, Ox was unfazed.

“Princess, do you have any proof that the Devil will be resurrected in one year?”

“Huh? That’s what...”

“It said in the forbidden book. But, that’s all you have, right?”

“You...”

Seeing Rufa’s reaction, Ox showed his first smile of the day.

“Judging from the mysterious construction of the labyrinth, the Devil of Demise must surely exist. Seeing that the number of monsters gushing out from the labyrinth’s depths has been growing highly indicates that the seal has grown weaker. However, we have no definite proof that the seal will break in one year.”

This forbidden book had been written a thousand years ago by the very first Emperor. There is no doubting that.

“However, that doesn’t mean that it will never be resurrected, right!?”

“Looking at the complex structure of the labyrinth and its width, another thousand years could pass before monsters start making it to the surface, don’t you think?”

“Ugh...”

Since Rufa could find no way to refute Ox’s logic, she was forced to stay quiet. Their different logical conclusions have been on parallel lines. Will the calamity happen in one year, or will it not? Will you throw away the hegemony for the sake of people, or will you ignore danger to keep living in luxury? There was no way that the opinions of the Empire and his subordinates, and Rufa’s would find a common ground. Hence, conclusion had to be found another way. In other words, the winner will be righteous.

“With this in mind, we cannot allow you to defeat the Devil of Demise. Hence, we will take you with us, and make sure you won’t do anything rash.”

So that Rufa wouldn’t try anything stupid, Eclair released her Aura that she had kept suppressed until now. Undoubtedly, she wasn’t an adventurer belonging to the 1st floor. She must be a 3rd floor ranker at least. Adding Ox and the other girls to that, Rufa and Garnet had no way of winning. Rufa understood that, and that’s why—

“I don’t care what you do with me. However, at least let Alba-sama—”

“Not happening.”

Rufa wasn’t allowed to finish her words, as Eclair cut in. She readied Alba’s deep red greatsword in her hand.

“I have a high evaluation of his. Even if he’s a perverted bastard for falling to our bad performance.”

She had hired these ruffians to assault her at that exact time and place, hoping that Alba would come to her aid. Eclair herself was aware that, no matter how strong he may be, a man could not win against her charm.

Although the circumstances were a bit different in this case, Alba still had been deceived by them.

“That fake Dark Knight might just make it down to the real one, and set foot to the Devil of Demise.”

If he and the other strong rankers like Godspeed Chidori worked together, it might not be impossible.

“That is why we have to kill him here.”

He has to be dealt with before he can gather more allies, and achieve the impossible. That is the job granted to the 'Labyrinth Peace Preservation Squad'.

"Don't worry. We will dismiss you from your position, and preserve his dead body in ice to not allow any revival."

Of course, no way could Rufa agree to this. Eclair was using Alba's deceased body as a means to threaten her. If she dared to rebel against this, his body would be destroyed, with no more hope of reanimation.

"Ugh..."

Unable to find any way out, Rufa couldn't hold back her tears.

"Hehehe, don't go crying now. We're going to lock up that dwarf girl as well, so you won't feel lonely."

"...Well, I should have expected as much." Garnet let out a sigh, as she glared at Eclair.

If she wasn't the daughter of the renowned Redberyl, she might have suffered from the same fate as Alba.

"Now then, Princess, let us go back to the castle." The knight grabbed Rufa's arm.

"Alba-sama, I'm sorry..." She couldn't back her tears any longer.





\*

“Gugoooooooo!”

A roar filled the wide open room I was in. Just its race suggested, it had sharp horns growing from its head, being a bear four times bigger than a human. As if it didn’t even care I was forced into this room, it slowly approached me, and attacked.

“Woah!”

With speed not befitting of its name Sloth, it leaped at me, as I panicked to dodge. The monster crashed into the wall, and turned around like nothing happened. I was hoping that attack could have broken the door open, but sadly that wasn’t the case. Now that it’s come to this, I have no other choice but to defeat it myself—But, I had borrowed my greatsword to Eclair-san, so I don’t even have a weapon.

“What to do?” I was hesitating for a second, when the monster leaped at me once again. “Oops.”

I saw its giant claw, about the size of a cart, soar at me, so I was forced to once again evade it. Considering its size, that speed is crazy. But, exactly because of this size, its attacks are easy to predict, and the initial movement is fairly slow. I don’t think I’ll have trouble evading it. But, I can’t come out victorious if I just keep dodging. What should I do about this then?

I continued to run away from its attacks while thinking about how to deal with this. The monster suddenly in its tracks—as it started sucking in the air around it, together with the magical power. Ahh, this is bad!

“Roaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Together with an ear-splitting roar, a wave of magical power shook the atmosphere. Following that, I felt like the air around me grew heavier. What just happened!? My movements are dull like I’m trying to run inside the water.

“Goaaaaah!” The monster leaped at me yet again, and I planned on jumping to the side, but my body felt too slow I couldn’t quite make it.

I was flung up, reaching the ceiling of this room. Ah, I think I’ll die if I fall down from here. Thanks to my oddly calm thinking, in a situation like this even, I directed my feet at the ground, followed by my but, so that I could roll up my back, and dampen the impact.

“Alright, it worked.”

I didn’t feel any broken bone in my body, and although I managed to stand out without problems, my body was aching all over from the impact that Sloth landed on me. If not for this jet-black armor Gramps made for me—this ‘Providence Guard’, then I might have not made it out this easily.

“Still, what a bother.”

Sloth was observing its surroundings, when it finally spotted me again. Following that, it yet again gathered the magical power around us, and roared.

“Roaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

I tried evading this attack by leaping to the right, but the second I landed, the air around me grew heavier again. On top of speed, this attack also has a great range. Evading it seems to be very difficult. But, Sloth didn't give me much time to analyze this, as it attacked again. By leaping up, I managed to somewhat lessen the damage of the impact. When I soared through the air again, I landed on the place where I was first hit by the roar. "It's normal here."

The air around me, probably influenced by a magical spell in the form of a roar, was back to normal, allowing me to move freely. It seems like the speed and range of that attack might be pretty bothersome, but the time of effect was fairly short, huh. If there were more people in here, we could use the opening he shows during the cast, and defeat him quite easily, huh? Speaking in reverse, just as one person, this fight is pretty tough. Hit by this slow attack, you're fully open to any follow-up. If I at least had my greatsword, I could fight back in close distance...

"Can't help it."

I prepared myself for the worst, and glared back at the monster. While taking off my mask, I spoke.

"... 'Emerge.'"

The metal fixtures holding together my armor fell off, as my armor dropped to the ground. When I showed this to my childhood friend, she burst out laughing, and said that a name like 'Perv' was a better fit of a name. Feeling slightly embarrassed, I gathered all the Aura in my body at my back.

"Guah!?"

All of a sudden, Sloth, who only showed killing intent this far, suddenly stopped its movements, staring at me in shock. But, I can't blame it. Because Chinese peacock—or rather, the wings of a fairy were growing from my back.

"They told me not to show this to other people though..."

Grandma—the fairy princess Titania, mentioned that 'You are a hybrid, so if you show that to others, you'll be turned into an exhibition', and those words stay with me even now. Since I never ran into any other hybrids besides me, I don't know how rare of a type I am. But, the older lady that Gramps—the fairy king Oberon—cheated on Grandma with was apparently a human, and gave birth to my mother. But, since my father is also a human, the fact that I can still create fairy wings like this means that I'm a quarter fairy.

Worried that I wouldn't be able to live with other humans, my mother asked Gramps to take me in to live at I Lapsel—but, my own origin doesn't matter right now.

"You're not a human, so as long as I can make you keep quiet, all's fine."

"Guu...Roaaaaaaa!"



I flashed a confident smile, when Sloth showed a terrified expression for a second, only to quickly fire away his roaring attack. However, I had already disappeared. My fairy wings allowed me to shoot up into the air.

"You really don't get it." I spoke, and slowly quickly descended again, reaching the head of Sloth to land an axe kick.

"Gufu!"

Sloth let out a loud groan, waving his hand in an attempt to hit me, but I already was up in the air again.

"Of course, the bigger and heavier you are, the stronger you seem. But, that doesn't mean that smaller and more fragile beings are always weak."

Fairies are small. Once you reach up to the age of Gramps and Grandma with their thousand and upwards, you can grow up to be the size of a human, but my childhood friend for example is just the size of a normal fairy, so about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of me. That's why the inhabitants of this world live under the assumption that fairies are weak. The fact that they live far away on a deserted island must probably enforce this misunderstanding.

However, reality can often be deceiving. Exactly because fairies are small to a threatening level, they are skilled in their Giant Killer techniques. One hit from a giant enemy, and they're done for. That's why they have no need to focus on defense. No weapon in the hands of fairies could hurt others, that's why their techniques don't rely on any tools. Using the aura they have accumulated, they charge head-on with their bare hands to fight. And, this is the highest level of the fairy bare-handed style that the fairy king Oberon came up with.

"Let's do this!"

I leaped up into the air to where I could touch the ceiling, stuck out my right leg towards the monster bear, and had all the aura I gathered explode at my back. With speed faster than an arrow, I shot down at Sloth, who tried to intercept my attack with his fourth roaring attack.

"Roaaaaaaa!"

He probably tried to slow down my speed and land a counterattack, but it was already too late. My body moved faster than sound itself, breaking through the attack wave Sloth sent at me. My leg crashed right into Sloth's wide open mouth, and I blasted right out through the back of his head.

Fairy Bare-handed Secret Technique - Meteor Kick

A giant would never expect a small fairy to basically commence a suicidal attack by jumping into its mouth. To be fair, I never ran into a giant that would make someone like me with a human body look like a fairy, but it's not like that matters.

"....."

I arrived at the ground, and turned around. Any normal being would have died just from that, but the monster bear slowly turned towards me. And, as if it admired my efforts, it smiled, and scattered into particles of light.

"Thank you very much." I clapped my hands together, and gave a slight bow.

Erasing the wings on my back, I walked to where Sloth had been standing. Sadly, he didn't drop any magic stones. Instead, I found a single white medal on the ground. Picking it up, I could see an engraving that looked like the horned bear I just fought, together with the word 'Sloth'. This was the proof of having bested the 1st floor's Guardian, and the key to moving on to the next floor.

"Alright!"

Wrapped in a feeling of joy that made me forget all the pain aching in my body, I raised a cheer and jumped...Oh right, I almost forgot, but I have to go find Rufa and the others! I rushed towards the door. Unlike before, the door opened with just the smallest push. And, the second I stepped onto the path, I heard Rufa's saddened voice.

"Alba-sama, I'm sorry..."

"About what? I asked in confusion.

By doing so, Rufa's face shot towards me.

"Alba-sama, you were fine after a—Eh?" Rufa's expression quickly changed from joy to shock.

Also, that knight from yesterday is suddenly with her...Just what happened when I was fighting Sloth? I sought for help and looked over at Garnet, when she was just staring at me in a daze, her mouth open...Now then, is she hungry?"

"Don't treat me like a glutton!"

Ah, it's the same Garnet as always. But why is everyone so shocked? Garnet let out a sigh that might just reach the Devil down on the lowest floor.

"I mean, everybody would be shocked if a snow-white prince appeared from a black devil, you know." She said, and pointed at my face.

She must be talking about my white hair. I know that it might be a rare color to see, but I don't think I deserve the title of a prince. I mean, I inherited the blood of the fairy king, so technically...Ah, wait, I forgot to put on my armor!?

I panicked and ran back inside the Guardian's room, closing the door behind me. It's fine, I erased my wings, so they shouldn't have found out about me being a hybrid! Telling myself like this, I rushed to put on my armor again. Taking it off only takes a simple magic spell, but putting it back on again is quite time consuming.

Once I put on my mask, I checked that my armor was properly equipped, and I stepped through the door again. Thankfully, the door opened easily as before.

"So it really is Alba-sama..."

"Yeah."

For some reason, Rufa was gazing at me with a beet red face, almost spacing out, but I just nodded along. Alright, she hasn't found out! But, my joy was interrupted by the shaking voice of Eclair.



"Impossible...Even a 6th floor ranker shouldn't be able to defeat Sloth without a weapon..."

Yeah, he really was a strong enemy. If I didn't have my bare-handed skills, I wouldn't have been able to win. I was going to offer that she could learn some about it as well, when I realized...That's right, Eclair-san still has my precious greatsword.

"Could I have it back?"

"Eek...!"

I took a step forward, which led Eclair-san to drop my greatsword on the ground. Was it too heavy after all? But, I was pretty sure she was strong enough to easily breeze through the first floor...I really doubt I had to step in last night when she was bothered by these three guys. I don't know how much money they need to save their troubled hometown, but I'm willing to help until the bitter end, so she doesn't have to worry.

I looked at her with a gaze filled with such emotions, to which she took another step back, looking terrified. Weird...she had been this friendly just a few minutes ago...I felt hurt, but I decided to instead focus on the fact that the knight had appeared in the group.

Don't worry, we're not using any more Alarm, okay!

Yet again, I looked him straight in the eye to convey these feelings, but he equally fell back with an expression distorted by fear.

"To think he would be fine after all this...Let us retreat for today. However, Princess, I have to warn you that, in the event of you continuing to look into the Devil of Demise, the Emperor will fly into a rage!" The knight screamed, and headed for the exit of the labyrinth, not to mention with Eclair-san and the others for some reason.

...Seriously, what happened? Utterly lost and confused, I looked over at Rufa. Her gaze met mine, and she suddenly started blushing furiously again. She took a few deep breaths, and tightly grasped my hand.

"Alba-sama, thank you very much." She muttered, as a tear fell down her cheek.

I don't think she has to be this thankful just because I defeated Sloth though. I looked over at Garnet to seek help again, who gave me a hand sign.

Eh, should I really do that? Won't I get beheaded for doing this to the princess?

—Just. Do. It!

She sent me a glare. Given no other choice, I carefully wiped away the tear off Rufa's face.

"Alba-sama?"

She raised her face in confusion, but I ignored that, just carefully, yet tightly embracing her slender body.

"It's fine." I don't know why she suddenly started crying, but... "I will definitely defeat the Devil of Demise."

If this stops her from crying, I wouldn't mind getting beheaded.

“Alba-sama...!”

As if to betray my determination however, Rufa started to break out in tears again. Garnet you liar!

“You really are an idiot.” Garnet complained, and yet showed a kind smile. Giving her a warm and thankful gaze, I continued to rub Rufa’s back until she stopped crying.



1 Guardian of Providence

2 Written as ‘Arrival’



# Epilogue: Clear Weather After Cloudy Skies can be Deceiving

“W-What did you say!?”

As we headed to the exit of the labyrinth, Rufa and Garnet told me just what exactly had happened while I was gone, leaving me in shock. To think Eclair-san and the others were plotting to kill me.

“That’s why, them being so clingy towards Alba-sama was merely a plot, an act, so that you would let down your guard, and they had absolutely no positive affection towards you!” Rufa oddly enough emphasized what she had just said, leaving me quite saddened.

To be honest, I was thinking that they might just be interested in me. Gramps told me that ‘If she touches you first, then it’s all okay-dokey’, and with that excessive physical contact, even I’m not as ‘dense’ as my childhood friend keeps calling me. But, that was all just acting...I want to dig a hole and hide in there...

“You already entered a hole.”

A hole...Ah, the labyrinth! So clever! But, no jokes right now, please... I couldn’t even return a smile towards Garnet’s joke, as I just dropped my shoulders in defeat, when Rufa gently rubbed my head.

“Alba-sama, don’t feel so dejected. You just have to be more careful next time so that you don’t fall for their seduction.”

“Yeah.” I deeply nodded in response to Rufa’s cheerful words.

That’s right, there’s no way a cute girl from the capital would develop feelings for such a country boy like me. So that I don’t make the same mistake twice, I’ll be extra careful. Because there’s no way a girl from the capital would fall in love with me!

“Rufa, I understand that you want to remove any possible competition, but you’re just digging your own grave here.”

“W-What might you be talking about?”

Garnet flashed a pitiful expression for some reason, to which Rufa awkwardly averted her gaze. I don’t get what they’re on about, but if we keep talking about this topic, my heart might just get crushed, so I have to hurry and change the topic.

“What about the hindrance?”

In short, I brought up those that are trying to obstruct the subjugation of the Devil. No doubt, the soldiers of the Empire will try to get in our way,

going along with the orders of Rufa's father, the Emperor. In the midst of those, there surely will be adventurers trained in the labyrinth such as Eclair-san and the others. Unsure what we should do about these, I had asked Rufa, who gave a hesitant response.

"We will have to deal with them. For their own fortune and position, they dare risk the lives of the Empire's citizens, or even the entire world, and that cannot be forgiven."

In order to save the greater number of citizens, she readily declared to rebel against her father, making yet again realize that there was nobody more worthy of being the Empress.

"Alba-sama, in order to save the citizens of the Empire, we have to make the Empire our enemy. I know that it is a foolish concept, but would you fight alongside us?"

"Yeah." I nodded without a moment's hesitation.

I promised to defeat the Devil of Demise. No matter what happens, I won't back down now. In response to my resolute answer, Rufa yet again had tears appear in the corners of her eyes.

"Alba-sama, thank you very much." With dampened eyes, she smiled at me, and grabbed my both arms to thank me.

This appearance of hers almost looked like...Ah, not good, I almost got the wrong idea again.

"I figured this would happen." Garnet sighed.

Don't worry, I won't get ahead of myself and assume that Rufa actually is interested in me! I know that my name Alba sounds like Albatross, but I won't lose my memory after taking three steps, you know. In order to show this, I pulled my hands away.

"Ah..." Rufa showed a disappointed expression for a second, so I guess I really was just seeing things.

Still, making the Empire our enemy and defeating the Devil, I know I was boasting about it before, but is that actually possible? If we the soldiers go all out to capture us, and we lose, it's all over. Running away from the capital shouldn't be too hard in a worst-case scenario, but that way we wouldn't be able to defeat the Devil of Demise.

"No need to panic" Garnet seemingly picked up on my worries. "We might have made the Emperor our enemy, but it's not like the Empire as a whole is against us now."

What is she talking about? I tilted my head in confusion, when Rufa delivered an explanation.

"The only ones who know about the Devil are the Emperor as the center, together with a few selected ones. The majority of nobles and army soldiers have no knowledge of this."

Now that she mentioned it, the first Emperor hid this book in the forbidden storage, and Rufa only found it by pure chance, so I guess that is still a secret to most people.

"I figure that the biggest reason for this must be to avoid any panic, but there must be people who would disagree with the Emperor, and they surely want to prevent that from happening."

I see. Just because they're nobles or army soldiers doesn't mean they live for greed. Not everybody would want the labyrinth to continue existing.

"If you die, that's the end however. The riches and strength gathered from the labyrinth will be missed, for sure, but there should be a fraction that values life over this." Garnet gave a glimmer of hope.

"I don't exactly want to think about it, but the enemies of the Empire must surely wish for the labyrinth to disappear. At the same time, this could end up as a scandal for the Emperor, with him possibly losing his position, which leaves other nobles for a rush to the throne." Rufa followed in Garnet's words.

I don't really understand much about politics, but apparently our number of allies isn't zero, so I take it.

"That's why, the Emperor faction most likely won't be able to act out in the open. The fact that they tried to have you end up lost in battle shows enough about this."

Yeah, since they can't kill me in front of others, they have to use the Guardian of the labyrinth to do the dirty work. I guess there's things even the almighty Emperor can't do, huh.

"At the same time, the adventurers possess freedom in this capital. Even the Emperor cannot take away their right to 'Arrive at the lowest floor of the bottomless labyrinth'."

I get that. Unrelated to the Devil of Demise or the Emperor's rules, it's the romance of an adventurer to challenge the labyrinth. Even Gramps told me that 'It's the instinct of a man to enter a hole'.

"That's just a dirty joke."

Eh, really? What does it mean?

"Don't you ask me!"

I asked with a pure and curious heart, yet Garnet growled at me with a beet red face. How cruel...

"Let's leave aside the fact that Garnet has no experience whatsoever."

"You're saying that you have experience!?"

"Anyway, I doubt that the Emperor faction will obstruct us that greatly. If anything, we should be surprised that they acted this quickly." Rufa skillfully ignored Garnet's jab, and showed a puzzled expression.

Thinking about it, she's right. We've only started to work towards the Devil of Demise, and we were barely about to best the 1st floor. They were going all out to kill a 1st floor ranker just like that. I don't think they would have had it harder if they waited until we made it to the 5th floor or something...

"I figure they wanted to strike before we could amass more strength, but maybe the Emperor was just jealous that a man was this close to this beloved daughter."

"Stop with that, there's no way that shitty old man would have such human-like emotions!" Rufa sternly denied Garnet's jest.

As we were talking about this and that, we finally made it to the exit of the labyrinth. We walked up the long stairs, when we ran into the newcomer and middle-aged guard I met on my first day.

"T-The Dark Knight!?"

"Hello, good work today."

The middle-aged guard let out a shriek, whereas the newcomer gave a calm greeting. I returned a nod, and walked past them.

"You sure have nerves, calling out to that thing..."

"I don't think he's a bad guy, you know?"

I heard them talking behind my back, but I ignored that and moved on towards the lodging area, when a group of six adventurers walked towards us...Oh, aren't these?

"Alba-sama, did something happen?"

I happened to stop in my tracks, which led Rufa to give me a puzzled look.

"...No, it's nothing." I shook my head, and started walking ahead.

I planned to just walk past them and not react, but the swordsman that seemed to be the leader came walking straight towards me.

"Um, Dark Knight-san, thank you very much for saving us before!"

""""Thank you very much!""""

The other five followed him, and all lowered their heads towards me.

"What is this about?"

Garnet and Rufa were visibly confused. I can't blame them. These are the adventurers I saved on my first day here, when they were attacked by a troll. Still, I planned to hide my identity and they still found out...how embarrassing, I want to go back to my hole. I worked hard to suppress the urge to turn back and dash away, but the swordsman spoke up before I could do anything.

"I thought you were a monster back then, so I just ran away without thanking you."

Eh, that's what that was!?

"After that, I heard of an adventurer walking around, looking like the Dark Knight, so I realized it must have been you who saved us, so I wanted to properly thank you."

I'm happy that the misunderstanding was cleared up, but he isn't going to judge me based on the other rumours going around, right?

"But, I decided that I would stop being an adventurer, and I got in a fight with my teammates..." The male swordsman said so, as he gave an embarrassed look over to his team members.

I don't know what happened. But, the fact that they are heading for the labyrinth again is enough of an answer I need.

"A lot happened, and I couldn't thank you earlier, but thank you very much."

If I hadn't saved them back then, he would have never swung his sword again. He bowed down to me, clearly conveying these feelings, forcing me to scratch my mask in order to hide my bashfulness. I'm happy about this, but I don't think he has to go overboard like this...Ah, I know. Since he found out, I might as well.

I put one hand on my waist porch, and handed him a magic stone.

"Is this..."

Yeah, it's the magic stone that dropped from the troll you defeated. I picked it up and completely forgot about it, but I felt bad to steal the loot from someone else's prey, so I never handed this one in at the bank. He looked down at it in a daze, but eventually accepted it.

"I will treasure this, as a reminder of my inexperience."

Eh, you're not going to turn it into coins!? But, instead of giving me an answer, the swordsman and his team members lowered their heads one more time, and headed towards the labyrinth.

"Ehm, what exactly happened?" Rufa showed a confused reaction, but I was just as lost.

Only Garnet seemed to be in a good mood, as she slapped me on my waist.

"Good for you."

Yeah, I'm glad he didn't give up on his dream just yet.

"No, not that."

Eh, what else is there?

"Aren't you happy that someone appeared who wasn't deceived by your outer appearance?"

"Eh!?" I couldn't hold back a voice of surprise.

Did they find out that some country boy like me was hiding inside this cool armor!?

"...I knew that was coming, but you really are an idiot." Garnet sighed in disbelief.

How cruel! Rufa, say something as well!

"I-I totally understand it as well! I know that Alba-sama is a very kind person, contrary to his outer appearance!" Rufa averted her eyes, and grit her teeth.

I'm glad for the praise, but that wasn't the follow-up I wanted to hear.

"Well, I've known for a while now that you two are morons." Garnet complained, and left us behind.

Did she just treat Rufa like an idiot as well? My word, the tone of the dwarves seems to be quite peculiar. Either way, so that Garnet won't leave us behind, I took Rufa's hand, and started walking.

"U-Um...Alba-sama."

I turned around after she called my name, only to find Rufa blushing up to her ears, as she looked straight up at me.

"Please work hard for your dream."

She's talking about that? I was perplexed at first, but returned a nod.

"Yeah."

"It's a promise, okay? You have to defeat the Devil in one year, and gain the country, the castle, and the princess, please."

"Yeah."

I feel like she added more things towards the end there, but I just nodded yet again. With that, Rufa showed a blooming smile.

"I am looking forward to when that time arrives."

She sounded like a princess exchanging a promise of engagement with a prince. I was about to get the wrong idea yet again, but barely stopped myself. I kept holding Rufa's hand, as we chased after Garnet.







# Afterword

To everyone from the Famitsu Bunko fanbase, nice to meet you. This is Sasaki Sakuma, who oddly enough has never used accurate Wi\*ardry in my novels, but still loves Etrian O\*yssey<sup>1</sup> and 7th Dra\*on<sup>2</sup>. For starters, thank you very much for buying this book.

My previous works were 'The Hero who comes back to life no matter what', which harbors a world similar to Dragon Q\*est, and my current work involves more Wi\*ardry, called 'The Dungeon where you defeat monsters and earn items'.

I think you agree with me, but whenever you play a hack slash RPG, you often forget about the goal of saving the world, and just focussing on farming those rare items. I am one of those people, those feared completionists, so I can put many hundred hours into a game with no end. (Though I can't start a new game because of that, which just worsens my addiction...)

Leaving aside this addiction however, I'm sure that many of you must have looked at your filly grinded-out characters, strong enough to defeat the final boss, and thought: "Aren't they strong enough to take over the world?". This idea has brought me to create the basis of the Goldot Empire. Instead of defeating the last boss, they continue to work at their Empire for a thousand years, and the one to break free of this circle that makes you scream 'Just clear the game already!' is our protagonist this time, Alba. Though oddly enough, in this hack and slash world, this protagonist doesn't even need to raise his level or grind for items.

So, instead of this, I was hoping that you will enjoy the world view I've created, or the rows of misunderstanding. I would be even more happy if you found the interest in playing a hack and slash RPG in your free time. (Additionally, I really like Dia\*lo and God E\*ter as well).

I now realize I've been talking only about games, so let me get to the thanks.

First, I would like to thank my illustrator Inui Waon-sama for creating these wonderful characters, especially the girls who have turned out exceptionally cute.

Following that, I've been in the great care of my responsible editor Kibuki Miko-sama.

Naturally, I cannot forget everyone who was involved in the distribution of this novel, such as the companies and bookstores out there doing god's work.

Finally, I want to thank both my continuous readers, as well as any new readers that decided to read this book. I have no fitting words of gratitude. Thank you very much.

A certain day in December, 2018. Sasaki Sakuma.





1 [Etrian Odyssey](#)

2 [7th Dragon](#)

# Credits

Translation Group: Cclaw Translation  
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